WHAT I LEARNED after Leaving My Job as CEO of H&R Block to Become a Teacher and Founder of an Inner-City Charter School

STAND *for the* BEST

THOMAS M. BLOCH

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"I have so many books on my list to read and I rarely find the time or inclination. They all start sounding the same after a while. Not this one. It's like a steamy mystery but better. Tom Bloch's story is beyond good. It's real—about what a man who had everything in the proverbial sense did to restore a notion of excellence to schools that is all too often missing. It's a testament to what matters most, with keen insights into the failures we've endured in urban schools and a prescription for change that can no longer be overlooked."

—***Jeanne Allen,*** *president, The Center for Education Reform*

"Thomas Bloch is one of those rare people who 'walk the walk' and put their ethics into practice. His extraordinary efforts to educate so many forgotten children, and to figure out the business of education, prove that people truly can change the world. *Stand for the Best* is well-written, compelling, thought-provoking, and inspiring. I believe Tom has achieved his goal of doing something important with his 'one and only life,' and I hope his example will be wildly contagious among America's business leaders."

—***LouAnne Johnson,*** *author of* Dangerous Minds, The Queen of Education, *and* Teaching Outside the Box

"Mr. Bloch rewards readers with a humorous, honest, and hugely upbeat book. You will feel good as you go through Bloch's encouraging, entertaining story."

—***Joe Nathan,*** *director, Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute*

"On his way to finding his life's purpose, Tom Bloch identifies and tackles from many perspectives one of America's biggest challenges: providing educational equity for all its children. The story of his journey is written with humility, honesty, and humor. This is a wise book that will both inspire and help those who are similarly seeking."

—***Linda L. Edwards,*** *dean, UMKC School of Education*

"Tom Bloch's transition from CEO of H&R Block to inner-city math teacher in Kansas City is a selfless portrait in educational leadership. . . . Bloch's devotion to his students, his community, and his loving family hold vital lessons for the nation. In this profound treatise his vision and courage are as striking as they are understated."

—***John Baugh,*** *Margaret Bush Wilson Professor in Arts and Sciences; director, African and African American Studies,* *Washington University in St. Louis*

"What an inspiring and enjoyable book! *Stand for the Best* describes Tom Bloch's fascinating journey from a successful CEO to an outstanding teacher and founder of an inner city charter school. The author also shares his valuable insights on the keys to personal success and the importance of giving back to one's community. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to have a rewarding career and make a difference in the world!"

—***Dr. Michael Song,*** *ranked as the World's #1 Innovation Management Scholar*

"*Stand for the Best* should be read by any educator who wants to make a memorable difference in the dreams, character, and lives of young people, especially those who face tough odds. It should also be read by any person, whatever our calling, who wants to leave a lasting legacy for good. I loved this book."

—***Tom Lickona,*** *co-author,* Smart & Good High Schools; *director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, State University of New York at Cortland*

"Why would a guy turn in the keys to the CEO suite? In Tom Bloch's case, it's because he heard a call to do something radical with his life: serve inner-city kids. *Stand for the Best* is the surprising, engaging story of a corporate leader who discovered real power in helping kids find the potential others had ignored. For those who follow the school-policy wars, the book is particularly valuable for its lack of ideological cant. Bloch's insights about charter schools, character education, and teacher training emerge from his own first-hand experience in urban education."

—***Nelson Smith,*** *president, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*

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Dedicated to the extraordinary urban teachers who are spending their lives doing something that will outlast themselves

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN possible without the encouragement and support of my family. First and foremost, I thank my wife, Mary, who was also my first editor. Because her name will appear throughout the pages that follow, I'll simply say here that I'm grateful for her love. I'm also indebted to my two sons, Jason and Teddy. Both of them were away at college when I began writing this book, but they were more than willing to critique drafts of the chapters when they were home on break. Having been accustomed to helping them with their homework when they were younger, I enjoyed the role reversal.

As a young kid, I always thought I had the best mom and dad in the world. And I still feel that way. My parents, Marion and Henry Bloch, always cared more about the happiness of their children than about their own happiness. I'm thankful for their encouragement and love.

I can't say enough about the wonderful help I received from Dennis Farney in structuring and editing the chapters of this book. I feel fortunate to have worked with Dennis, whose distinguished journalism career included recognition as a Pulitzer Prize finalist. I value his terrific talent and coaching—and now his friendship.

Jeff Herman, my agent, sought to find a good home for my work, and he succeeded. That home was Jossey-Bass, thanks to editor Kate Bradford. Kate took an immediate interest in my story and offered superb input and guidance to improve the manuscript. She seemed to know exactly what was missing and what needed to be changed. I hope this book is a source of pride to Kate, Dennis, Jeff, and all who contributed to it in one form or another.

This book also wouldn't have been possible without my students, each of whom has helped me grow as a teacher and as a person. I also thank the teachers and administrators from whom I've learned over the years. In particular, I want to acknowledge the three administrators under whom I've had the opportunity to teach: Lynne Beachner,

Patricia Henley, and Cheri Shannon. I appreciate their leadership and support.

A special thanks to Barnett Helzberg, a cousin, a mentor, and the chairman emeritus of University Academy. And my thanks also go to the other board members of University Academy and everyone connected with the school, including parents Rose Kershaw and Elnora Woods, and educators Clem Ukaoma, Darran Washington, John Veal, Jason Balistreri, Tracie McClelland, Kellie Baker, Karen Howard, and David Wolff, each of whom contributed to this book. I'm grateful, too, for the assistance of the faculty and staff at the Institute for Urban Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, including Jennifer Waddell, Ed Underwood, and Omiunota Ukpokodu. My gratitude also goes to educators Joan Caulfield, Janel Atwell, and Tina Akula.

Finally, I want to acknowledge all of the associates at H&R Block who were understanding and supportive of my career decision. The greatest joy of my career at the company was working with its many dedicated and talented individuals. I've always been thankful for the opportunity to be associated with the company that my dad and uncle founded. H&R Block continues to mean a great deal to me.

Any profits I receive from this book will be used to promote an equal educational opportunity for all children.

Stand for the Best

INTRODUCTION

IN EARLY 1995, quite deliberately, I stepped down as CEO of H&R Block, where I was making nearly a million dollars a year. I had decided to follow a higher calling: teaching math to inner-city kids. This is the story of how that decision changed my life and the lives of kids I tried to help.

The decision was the most painful one I have ever made. It made no sense in conventional career-building terms. But worse than that, I was leaving the family business, a nationally known tax preparation firm that my dad had cofounded with little more than an idea and a $5,000 loan from his aunt. He had built it from nothing; I agonized about letting him down. But the bottom line, for me, was intensely personal. I wanted to leave my own kind of legacy with my one and only life.

What followed over the past thirteen years has been an education—for me even more than for the kids I tried to teach.

As CEO, I had directed tens of thousands of employees from a quiet and spacious corporate office. Suddenly I was teaching mostly poor, mainly African American students in a makeshift classroom in an inner-city school. At H&R Block I dealt with motivated, upward-striving employees. Now I had to try to motivate kids who, all too often, lived hour to hour.

"I have no future," one told me.

I had been warned, but nothing quite prepared me for the spirit-crushing realities of the inner city. There was the father who was arrested at the school's front door for possessing drugs. Other parents

were sullen or even openly hostile. There were kids who went "home" to homeless shelters. There was the disgruntled former student who came back to school with a carload of friends and assaulted two staff members.

Amid the turmoil and the setbacks, I made discoveries that cheered me. I met bighearted volunteers like Rose and Elnora who made the school better through sheer force of will. I learned what a tremendous force for good even one such volunteer can be. I met dedicated teachers who somehow kept going despite a daily buffeting—and, more than that, kept their idealism intact. This book is also a tribute to them.

Urban education lies at the heart of our most urgent national problem. Our public schools should be, as they were intended to be, engines that lift the poor into the middle class. Yet, as everyone knows, urban education has been in crisis for decades. How *do* we teach inner-city kids? This book explores a number of ideas, including one promising innovation, the charter school. I eventually "graduated" from my makeshift classroom to cofound a $40-million charter school in Kansas City, Missouri. It's called University Academy, and it now enrolls eleven hundred students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. But I don't want to mislead anyone. University Academy has faced its own challenges. Charter schools don't have all the answers. Nobody does.

This, then, is the story of an idealist's journey. The idea to write a book had been in the back of my mind for years, but it wasn't until just two years ago that I decided to actually do it. Being somewhat reserved, however, I admit that I had to overcome reluctance about revealing my thoughts and experiences to public scrutiny.

"You've always been such a private person," my longtime and respected friend Debbie Smith remarked in surprise. She knows me well, having arranged a blind date for me in 1979. I later married that date. My wife, Mary, has been a pillar of support and encouragement throughout my career and the writing of this book.

The novelty of a CEO who traded status and power for teaching in front of a blackboard drew more national attention than I could ever have anticipated. It began with a front-page story in my hometown

newspaper, the *Kansas City Star.* "Bloch Making His Mark in the Classroom," the caption read. National media followed. There was a feature in *People* magazine followed by a segment on *Oprah.* I appeared on the *Today* show and in the *New York Times,* among numerous other media outlets. I was in the spotlight so much during my second year in the classroom that I sometimes felt more like a rock star than a teacher.

But I wasn't a star of any kind. I was a relatively inexperienced teacher who had suddenly become a poster boy for the profession. That was particularly evident when my picture appeared on the cover of *Teaching Pre K–8*, a national magazine for teachers. None of the teachers I knew and worked with, most of whom were plenty more experienced than I, had received recognition outside their classrooms. They deserve it. I consider dedicated and gifted teachers to be genuine heroes.

"Don't feel guilty about the attention you're getting," a colleague told me more than a decade ago. "Your publicity is raising the level of respect for the teaching profession." I hope this book will contribute to that end.

In the chapters that follow, I have changed the names of my students (except for Tina, who is first identified in Chapter Three, and Jenell and DeAndré in Chapter Eight). Also, many of the individuals I've described are composites of actual people I've known. And identifying details about individuals and the circumstances in which they are presented have been changed. Finally, I would note that there are quotations in this book that are reconstructions of conversations as best as I can recall them.

I do not regret my decision to leave the corporation for the classroom. The English novelist E. M. Forster put it well: "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

CHAPTER

1

OFF THE BLOCK

I KNEW THAT I was fortunate. I knew that by all rules of common sense, I should be content.

But I wasn't. I couldn't shake the feeling that something—something big and fundamental—was missing. What was missing was a life outside H&R Block.

I was CEO, and the job was consuming my life.

I was making nearly a million dollars a year. But I was also worn out—from worrying. I worried about the company, the next quarter, the next tax season. I thought about the business day and night, which made it hard to focus on my wife, Mary, and our sons, Jason and Teddy. My friends used to tell me I had the world by the tail. But I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders—which was ironic, given that I often criticized myself for doing too little.

It was 1994, and I was completing my eighteenth year at H&R Block, the nationally known tax preparation and financial services firm headquartered in Kansas City, and my fifth year as president. I oversaw tens of thousands of employees worldwide from my spacious office, dominated by a collection of original editorial cartoons that covered one whole wall. Each cartoon mentioned the company in some context. One of my favorites had a 911 operator telling a caller, "We're only allowed to connect you to the police, fire department, or hospital . . . you'll have to call H&R Block yourself."

That cartoon reflected reality: H&R Block had made itself almost indispensable, preparing one out of every ten tax returns in the

United States. In fact, it had created a whole new industry. There were no retail tax preparation firms when my father, Henry Bloch, and his brother Richard founded the company in 1955. (Although the family name is Bloch, pronounced Block, the brothers substituted the *h* for a *k* to avoid mispronunciation. After all, you'd never take your tax return to someone who would "Blotch" it.)

Today, H&R Block dominates the market it did so much to create. As one profile of the company puts it, "Only two things are certain in this life, and H&R Block has a stranglehold on one."[1]

I was proud of our success, and my pride had an extra dimension. H&R Block still felt like a family firm, even though it had gone public in 1962 and had grown tremendously, diversifying into computer and temporary help services. The family now owned well under 5 percent of its stock. But Dad remained chairman when I was CEO, and woven into that company were the history and aspirations of two Bloch family generations.

Dad and his two brothers, Leon Jr. and Richard (better known as Dick), grew up in a middle-class Kansas City household. My grandfather Leon Sr. was a lawyer who owned a few rental houses in low-income neighborhoods. Much of his legal practice involved helping his tenants and their friends and relatives. My grandmother Hortence, who ran the household, was a disciple of Ralph Waldo Emerson. She kept his essays, journals, and poems in her sitting room.

Dad's biography is spelled out on the company's Web site. He attended the University of Michigan thanks to Kate Wollman, a wealthy aunt in New York City who paid his college tuition. (The Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park is named after Kate and her brothers.) After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Dad enlisted in the Army Air Corps and then left school during his last semester when he was called to active duty. (In 1944, he received his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan.) As a navigator of a B-17 bomber, he flew thirty-one missions over Germany, including three over Berlin. He had some narrow escapes and earned the Air Medal and three Oak Leaf Clusters.[2]

In 1946, after the war and a one-year stint as a stockbroker, Dad and his older brother, Leon, started a Kansas City bookkeeping service they called United Business Company. Aunt Kate helped them launch it, although in retrospect it appears that she may not have been quite as optimistic as they were. Dad and Leon asked her for an investment of $50,000. She responded with $5,000—in the form of a loan that she required their father to cosign.

For a while, that loan appeared to be in jeopardy. Business was so slow that Leon quit to attend law school. Dad, determined to keep going, looked for an assistant by taking out a help-wanted ad. His mother was the only person to respond.

"Hire your younger brother, Richard," she ordered.

"I can't afford to hire Dick," Dad replied. "He's married." Then, an obedient son, he did hire Dick, and the two brothers tried to make a go of it.

In 1951, when the business was on firmer footing, Dad married Marion Helzberg, a beautiful, red-haired graduate of the University of Missouri. Their families had been friends for years and were members of the same temple. And three years after that, I was born—as it happens, one day before the filing deadline. While Mom was in the delivery room, Dad was in the waiting room, filling out tax forms for the company's bookkeeping clients.

Looking back, it's highly ironic that Dad and Dick came very close to dropping the tax preparation portion of their business. It wasn't making money at first, and it required them to work seven days a week during the hectic tax season. In fact, H&R Block might not exist today were it not for the intervention of John White, a client who also was a display advertising salesman for the *Kansas City Star.* White urged them to operate the tax preparation business separate from the bookkeeping business—and to place a $100 ad in the newspaper.

"But we would need to prepare twenty returns just to break even!" Dad protested. (The going rate was $5 a return in those days.) Actually, White countered as he smoothly upped the ante, it would be better to run *two* ads while they were at it. Dick insisted on giving the idea a try, and Dad went along, expecting little, fearing the worst.

It was good that he did. On the morning the first ad appeared, Dad was making the rounds of bookkeeping clients when he got an urgent phone message to call the office. "Hank, get back here as quick as you can," Dick shouted. "We've got an office full of people!"[3]

That was 1955, the company's breakout year. Quite by coincidence, the IRS helped the company along just then by discontinuing its free taxpayer assistance program in Kansas City. Meanwhile the brothers changed the name of their company to H&R Block and grossed $20,000 in tax preparation revenues.

By 1978, H&R Block was a household name throughout the country. That was also the year that Dick was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and was told he had ninety days to live. Instead of giving up, he got a second opinion and embarked on an aggressive treatment plan. In 1982, after he had defied the odds and defeated the disease, he sold his interest in the company. He dedicated himself to helping others fight cancer.

Two years before Dick's illness, I joined the company, after graduating from Claremont McKenna College. I learned the business by preparing returns in a local Kansas City tax office and serving in a variety of positions at the corporate headquarters. I oversaw the automation of the tax business, and in 1981 I became president of the tax division. In 1989, at age thirty-five, I was elected president of the company. Three years later, I succeeded Dad as CEO.

Dad went out of his way to avoid pressuring me to succeed him. Nevertheless, even before I was thirteen, when he assigned me to sweep tax office floors, H&R Block somehow seemed bound up with my self-image and my expectations of the future. Once, in third grade, my class was asked to draw pictures of what we wanted to be when we grew up. The other kids drew things like fire engines and police cars. I drew a man sitting behind a desk.

Now I was behind that desk. Being CEO certainly had its satisfactions. Probably the biggest one was the feeling I got when I would make an executive decision and then feel the company respond beneath me, changing course like some great ocean liner. And it was especially satisfying when changing course proved to be a good decision. But I simply

couldn't leave my office problems at the office door. They followed me home, and I couldn't let them go.

Mary said I was having, at age forty, a midlife crisis. I suppose that is as good a label as any, but I don't think it captures the depth of what I was feeling. It wasn't that I was seized by some midlife desire to buy a sports car or run away to Tahiti. I was in the grip of something far bigger than that. I wanted my life, my one and only life, to make a bigger difference.

Whatever the label, I had been in conflict for some time. It wasn't because of one single thing. It was because of an accumulation of things.

I'm a worrier. I felt that if I worried about something long enough, it wouldn't happen. And it usually worked. Sometimes I worried about big things. What if Congress passed a flat tax? That kind of simplification could result in a tax return the size of a postcard, which certainly wouldn't be healthy for business. Sometimes I worried about small things. Was I traveling enough to our outposts during tax season? But whether my worries were big or small, I was always worrying about something.

I didn't sleep well at night. I would wake up Mary at two in the morning. She hated that.

Before I go any further, I want to say that Mary, an attorney, is as tolerant of me and my idiosyncrasies as any husband has a right to expect. For example, she would say—and I would have to admit—that I'm frugal, especially when it comes to spending money on myself. Notwithstanding our income, we lived in a comfortable house, but hardly a lavish one. This was okay with Mary. But occasionally, especially earlier in our marriage, I carried my frugality too far, almost to the realm of tightwad. At least Mary forgave me for the time years ago when I gave her, in all seriousness, a Christmas gift of halogen lights from the Home Depot. (It had seemed like a logical choice to me. We needed better lights in the basement. But I'll never forget the horrified looks on the faces of my in-laws. And I've noticed that since that time, Mary has been exceedingly specific about her Christmas list.)

Mary would listen to my 2 A.M. monologues—to a point. To me, each corporate crisis was distinct, and each demanded a new round of agonizing. But to Mary, more down to earth than I, each was simply another episode in the same long-running story.

Eventually she would say, "You're repeating yourself. I've got to get some sleep. Just let it go." She would turn over and be back asleep almost instantly. I've never seen anyone go from wakefulness to sleep so fast; it was a feat comparable to a racecar going from zero to ninety in five seconds. And I would still be lying there, alone with my thoughts.

Mary began to worry about my health. "You're going to kill yourself," she warned one day. "At the rate you're going, you'll be dead by fifty."

My relentless agonizing took a toll on family life. "You aren't even listening to us," she told me one evening at the dinner table. "Your son Jason just asked you a question, and you didn't even hear him."

Tax seasons unfortunately coincided with our sons' basketball seasons, and I always hated to miss their Saturday games while I was holed up at the office. It was equally painful when I returned home to hear Mary recount like a play-by-play sports broadcaster a pivotal basket or steal that one of them made.

We usually vacationed in Phoenix over the boys' spring break from school. But it wasn't unusual for me to return to Kansas City after only a day or two to contend with a business crisis that was brewing. Mary wondered whether it was always necessary for me to get back to the office. Now, on further reflection, I'd have to admit that her doubts were justified.

I tried to change. I read a couple of self-help books. I exercised religiously. Nothing worked. I remained implacably, stubbornly myself.

I also discovered that I didn't have much of a social life. I had scarcely any hobbies beyond cutting brush and clearing hiking trails on the wooded farm we owned near Kansas City.

I felt hemmed in by the life I was living. If I was ever to be fulfilled, I was going to have to do something else.

But what? Gradually my thoughts turned to teaching. Even though I'd had only two brief experiences as a teacher, I realized that I had found unexpected satisfaction in teaching.

My first teaching experience began with a casual decision made for the most mundane of reasons. "There is an opening for a French teacher at the elementary school in Claremont [California]," my French professor mentioned to me after class one day. "I thought you might be interested. You won't get paid, but you'll earn course credit for the semester."

I was only twenty years old and had never taught before, so I think I learned more by teaching these fifth-grade students than they learned from me. I can't pretend that the experience was entirely pleasant. I was just a college student, and I don't think the kids quite took me seriously. As a case in point, they promptly named me "Mr. Blockhead." But on the whole it was enjoyable and gratifying to see the kids learn the basics of a new language.

My other teaching experience was at H&R Block, which operates the country's largest tax preparation school, with more than two hundred thousand students enrolling annually. It was early in my career, after having completed the company's thirteen-week tax preparation course and then working for a season in a local tax office.

Teaching that tax preparation class was tougher than teaching those fifth graders because, at the time, I probably knew less about the intricacies of the tax code than I knew about French. But it too was satisfying. A decade later I encountered a tax preparer I had taught. Still with the company, she had developed a large and loyal clientele and had become a tax instructor herself. "You probably don't remember me, Mr. Bloch," she began. But I did remember her, and it was fulfilling to know that my teaching had helped her along the way, and that she also had decided to help others through teaching.

These two prior teaching experiences were indirectly influential in my decision to switch careers. The main lesson I learned from them was that teaching—and reaching out to others—can produce a great sense of satisfaction. When I thought about these experiences, I recalled the good feeling that came from making a commitment to others.

But if I was interested in teaching, where would I teach? Where could I do the most good? My thoughts turned to the inner city.

Why do so many inner-city kids fail to use school as their ticket to the middle class? Why, after decades of intensifying national effort,

from desegregation in the 1960s to the No Child Left Behind program of today, hasn't more progress been made in educating these kids? Is it the fault of the school districts? The teachers? The parents? The kids themselves? Isn't there some way to overcome the low expectations that hobble kids before their lives have scarcely begun? Is this really the best we can do?

Kansas City, Missouri, was as good a place as any to seek answers to these questions. Its public school system embodied all the problems of urban school systems everywhere. I did some research to find out where the problems were coming from.

For decades, Kansas City's public schools were starkly segregated, not by law but by the de facto segregation that kept African Americans confined to their ghetto. Everybody had a neighborhood school, but the black schools got far less money than the white schools. One school board member complained that rainwater dripped into buckets in his son's classrooms, and insulation hung from holes in the ceiling.[4]

But if segregation was a persuasive explanation for poor academic achievement in the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed less persuasive by the 1980s and 1990s. With the end of redlining (the refusal by lenders to make loans in particular areas based on their racial makeup) and other unlawful practices, the city's African Americans surged far beyond the boundaries of their old ghetto. To be sure, a good deal of de facto segregation remains a fact of life in Kansas City. An otherwise nondescript street named Troost Avenue is still an invisible but universally recognized boundary between two cities, one black and one white. But in just about every other way, from increased funding to sparkling new schools, Kansas City has worked hard to give its minority kids a chance.

The impetus for much of this effort was a sweeping federal school desegregation ruling in 1984. The court held the State of Missouri liable for the deplorable state of black schools. Between 1985 and 1995, the state, under duress, pumped more than 1.5 billion new dollars into the Kansas City system. Striking new schools were built, featuring the latest in computers and audiovisual equipment and, in one case, an Olympic-size swimming pool. The district was reorganized, with newly

formed magnet schools offering a menu of choices from college prep to French immersion. Essentially, any student could ask to go to any school (space permitting), and if a bus route wasn't available, the district would pay for his or her taxi ride.

The hope was that the sparkling new schools would keep white parents from moving to the suburbs and attract white children back from the private schools that many of them attended. This didn't happen; in fact, district enrollment as a whole has continued to decline. But perhaps even more discouraging, academic achievement has been stagnant. A 2006 study of the district by the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban schools, concluded that Kansas City students ranked "well below peers statewide, and their performance has not been getting much better of late." About the most positive thing the study had to say was to praise the courage of the Kansas City School Board for inviting the study in the first place.[5]

Personally, I could think of no better way to make a difference than by teaching inner-city kids. But let me be clear about this. I knew I wouldn't be doing this just for the kids. I would also be doing it for myself. I wasn't sure if I could really change the lives of Kansas City students or have much of an effect on the quality of the schools, but I felt I had to try.

I had several heart-to-heart talks with Dad as I agonized about a new direction for my life. Finally, in early 1995, I told him I had decided to leave the company. I had dreaded this talk for months.

He listened thoughtfully, receptively, as always. "I can't believe it," he said. "Take some time off. Get out of the office and take a real vacation with Mary. Think about this some more."

So Mary and I went to Aspen. My mind seesawed between yes and no several times a day as Mary and I hiked and went cross-country skiing. But in the end it settled on yes: I was going to leave the company for teaching.

We wanted our sons to be among the first to know, but I wasn't quite prepared for the reaction of six-year-old Teddy. I watched as an expression of growing concern crossed his face. "Are you going to be *my*

teacher?" he asked. I reassured him that his private school already had fine teachers and had no need of me. He looked greatly relieved.

A couple of weeks later, I found a homemade card on the breakfast table at my place. It was from Teddy to me. On the cover, it said "Bravo!" Inside was the following: "Dear Dad, I hope you are a great teacher. I want to have as much time [as I can] with you. This is a great dicistoin [*sic*]. Love, Teddy." His note reinforced a growing, if shaky, conviction that I had made the right decision.

In April 1995, H&R Block formally announced my decision to leave. I stayed on until August, until my successor was identified and on board. Then, on a typically hot and humid summer day, the day after I cleaned out my office, my father hosted a farewell lunch for me.

I was told it was going to be a small gathering, just Mary and me, my dad, and a few senior executives. I didn't look forward to putting on a suit and tie, but I had no choice. It was very thoughtful of my father to host this luncheon for me. I put on an old suit, but Mary stopped me before we got out the door of our house.

"Oh, you can't wear that old brown suit!" she said. "Why don't you wear one of your nicer ones?" I had heard such words before. I don't know how many times Mary had chided me over the years for "inappropriate" attire. Usually I had ignored this advice, and I ignored it again on this day. "It doesn't matter what I wear," I insisted.

We went to the Crowne Plaza Hotel, across the street from the corporate offices. Mary Vogel, my longtime executive assistant at the company, was there to meet us in the lobby. She looked annoyed and worried. There had been a mistake. There was no record of a reservation at the restaurant. However, the hotel had offered us a small conference room on the second floor.

When we got to the conference room it was utterly empty.

"Something must be wrong," Mary said in disgust. "Let's go across the hall and see if we are supposed to be in there."

"But that's the ballroom," I protested. We went in anyway.

The ballroom was certainly not empty. In fact, it was filled with hundreds of people, sitting at tables and waiting for their lunches to be

served. I was about to remark that we had apparently crashed some kind of convention. But then everyone turned toward us and began applauding.

I looked more closely at the faces in the room. They were all H&R Block employees, including Kansas City associates as well as senior field leaders from out of town. It finally hit me. This was a surprise party . . . for me. My wife had a huge grin on her face. Obviously, she had been part of this. Now I understood why she had been so adamant that I wear a nice suit. I began to wish that, for once, I had followed her advice.

The applause didn't stop. I hugged both Marys, and we were escorted to a table where Jason and Teddy and my mother and father waited to greet us. Mom, beautiful as always, was putting up a brave front, but I knew that this was a bittersweet occasion for her. She, even more than Dad, had been stunned by my decision to leave. I hugged them all and sat down, and finally everyone else did the same. I tried as hard as I could to hold back the tears.

After one of those typical rubber-chicken lunches, Eddie Feinstein, who oversaw the company's computerized tax preparation and electronic filing programs, served as master of ceremonies. He was wonderfully entertaining. "It's no secret why Tom quit to become a teacher," he joked. "He wants his afternoons and summers off." (If only this were so. I would learn soon enough that these notions are the biggest misconceptions about a teacher's life.)

Imitating David Letterman, Eddie recited the top ten things I will tell my students. Number six was, "I don't know—call a tax office." And number five was, "Quit calling me Blockbuster!" Eddie also ranked the top ten things I'd like about teaching school. Last was "Great school lunches" and first, of course, was "Recess."

A beautiful video was shown, highlighting my nineteen-year career at the company. It brought more tears to my eyes, and I only wish I had been as good a leader as the video said I was. Several executives then spoke about working with me, and their words were most generous. "Henry laid the foundation for the business, and you built upon it." That's

what Harry Buckley, president of tax operations, said. Harry personified the values and culture that made H&R Block a great company.

I was presented with a large scrapbook, full of letters from all over the country. There was also a gift from the company. Given all that I was feeling at the moment, it was not easy to unwrap the box in front of everyone. After what seemed like an eternity of unwrapping the most tightly assembled package ever, I was holding a beautiful barometer and wind gauge.

The barometer held a hidden meaning. "The Barometer" was the company's name for a semiweekly report during tax season on tax-preparation activity in our far-flung office network. This report, which compared current activity to that of a year-earlier period, became a barometer of my own mood as CEO. Mary always said that when I returned home on Mondays and Thursdays she could tell at a glance whether the latest Barometer reading had been up or down. "It's written all over your face."

Then it was time for me to speak. I'd had plenty of practice in public speaking, but this was the most difficult speech I had ever given. I didn't want the luncheon to end. I wondered how many of the guests I would ever see again. I walked up to the microphone, looked around the room, and deliberately remained silent for several seconds. Then I announced: "I've changed my mind. I want to stay." I was joking, of course, and the room erupted in laughter. But, in truth, I was having some serious second thoughts about my decision.

I had hardly slept at all the previous night. Was I nuts to leave all this behind? Would I be a good teacher or a washout? Could I even relate to inner-city kids? I couldn't forget the blunt advice a friend had given me a few months earlier. "Go travel and enjoy life," he said. "Teaching in the inner city will only bring aggravation and disappointment."

Years later, Dad would talk about my choice at a mayor's prayer breakfast. "I believe Tom made an ethical decision," he said. "He chose to be the best person he could imagine himself being." And he concluded, "Let us stand in the places we are most afraid we will fail. Let us stand for the best, no matter what the cost. Let us stand so that we can strengthen each other."

I don't think it would be possible to articulate my aspirations more eloquently. But that was years later. On my sleepless night before the farewell luncheon, I couldn't stop thinking about something he told me as we talked of my leaving the company.

"If you leave," he said, "you realize that you probably never will have an opportunity to come back."

I knew he was right. There was no turning back now.

CHAPTER

2 BACK TO SCHOOL

MY GOAL WAS TO create a seamless transition between careers. With a four-month window between the public announcement of my resignation from H&R Block and my actual departure, I began my homework to answer the question that suddenly everyone would ask me: "Where and what are you going to teach?"

Initially, that homework proved to be unsettling.

The first assignment I gave myself was to schedule a tour of an inner-city public high school. I thought doing so was more than appropriate, as I was planning to teach in an inner-city school but had never stepped inside one. As long as I live, I'll never forget that visit.

I drove up to the school, which was not in the best of neighborhoods, to find what appeared to be hundreds of students crowding the front of the building. "What's happening?" I asked a student.

"Oh, there was a fire alarm, so everybody had to leave the building," she explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "The fire department has to come check it out." I didn't see any flames or smell smoke. No one seemed the least bit concerned that there was a problem.

I remember fire drills as a kid. We had to stand in tight, straight rows in the parking lot. Here, it looked like a giant recess, only this one was for high school students, not elementary kids. I didn't enjoy the wait nearly as much as the students did, and I was strongly tempted to leave. But I didn't.

A fire truck finally arrived, and after an inspection, the building was cleared for reentry. I proceeded to the office, where I was introduced to

the assistant principal. He offered to be my guide, and I asked if I could also observe a math class for one period.

As we walked down the hall, I couldn't help but notice a number of students hanging out in small groups of two or three. As we approached the first group, the vice principal politely asked them to go to their assigned classes. None of them moved. The kids just stared back, waited for us to walk away, and then resumed their conversation. Already I was seeing something entirely different from the suburban public high school I had attended almost twenty-five years earlier. There, anyone caught in the halls without a pass risked disciplinary action.

"What a fluke that I arrived just after the fire alarm sounded," I commented to my guide. "No," he corrected me, "I'm not sure I'd call it a fluke. It happens quite often. Kids intentionally set off the alarms to get out of class."

The building was old but at least reasonably well maintained. Yet it wasn't a pleasant environment in which to learn, at least compared to the high school I had attended. It was like a big, old factory. Almost all the students here were African American, but I also saw a number of Asians and a few white students as well. My old high school on the other side of the Missouri-Kansas state line was, as I recall, 100 percent white.

The vice principal dropped me off at an algebra classroom. I was immediately struck by the desk-to-student ratio. There must have been at least twenty-five desks, but only five or so students. If nothing else, this meant that I had my pick of seats, and I took one at the back of the classroom.

Using an overhead projector, the teacher took the tiny class through a series of problems, one calculation after another, while explaining in a monotone how he was attacking each one. He obviously knew his stuff, but the man had no spark. Years of teaching had ground him down. He looked listless. The only interaction he had with the students was when one—and only one—of them asked questions. The others didn't even pretend to be interested. One even put her head down on the desk for most of the hour. I was inclined to do the same.

At the end of the class, I introduced myself to the teacher, naively commenting that I was impressed by the small class size. Now he taught me a lesson.

"This is a fairly typical day in terms of attendance," he explained. "But, of course, there are many more students on the class roster." So where were all the other kids who were supposed to be there?

"Many of the students in this part of town have a job," he lectured. "They *need* to have a job. And then there are others who don't show up for any number of reasons."

"Can students who fail to attend regularly actually learn the skills necessary to pass the course?" I asked.

"As long as students come to class as often as they can, they'll pass," he replied. "It's important to demonstrate effort." His response confused me. How could simply showing up for class—either regularly or occasionally—be considered an acceptable demonstration of effort? And isn't academic achievement a key factor in determining whether a student passes or fails?

The assistant principal picked me up in the classroom to conclude our tour. "I'm puzzled over something," I persisted. "If a student doesn't come to school regularly and therefore can't demonstrate academic proficiency, is he promoted to the next grade?"

"You don't understand, Mr. Bloch," the assistant principal said, looking a little irritated. "For these kids, walking across the stage on graduation day to get their diploma will probably be the highlight of their lives. They don't have much to look forward to, unlike the rest of us. No one should deprive these kids of a diploma."

I thanked him for his time. But as I walked to my car, I had a question for myself: "What am I getting myself into?"

Years later I read what Elizabeth Bowler, a teacher working with immigrants in Yorktown Heights, New York, said about why she chose to teach. I liked the simplicity of her answer: "I became a teacher because I wanted to help the underdog."[1] Certainly the students at the inner-city high school I visited in Kansas City were underdogs. But it

wasn't at all clear to me that either the math teacher I observed or the vice principal were really helping them.

Fortunately, not all of my pre-teaching homework was this discouraging. Mary served on the board of a local nonprofit that provided professional development services to schools, so I had lunch with its president. She told me about the Central City Schools, a subgroup of eight inner-city Catholic schools. She suggested I call Sister Anne Shepard, the superintendent of the diocese.

I spoke on the phone to Sister Anne (the first opportunity I ever had to speak to a nun), and she was receptive. She indicated it might well be possible for me to teach in one of her schools, even if I didn't have a teaching certificate. However, I felt it was important to get certified eventually, because it would be required should I later want to teach in a public school.

I contacted four local colleges offering teaching programs. None of them had a special program for people like me, professionals making a midcareer transition into teaching. I thought this was a mistake and a missed opportunity, especially considering that there were teacher shortages in some content areas, such as math and science, and in certain geographic areas. Over the years, I had talked with several individuals who might have done the same thing I was doing, except that the cost of getting certified—in both time and money—was simply too high.

Licensing requirements vary from state to state. In Missouri, you must have a degree from a college or university that has a teacher education program approved by a state education agency. Depending on the subject matter or level you plan to teach, this could involve completing up to sixty semester credit hours of education classes. Included in the academic program is clinical experience of ten semester hours, comprising two hours of field experience and eight hours of student teaching. Then, in addition to the course work, you must pass the state's content knowledge or specialty area test.

For career changers who have to support a family, the idea of becoming a full-time student for a couple of years in order to earn the necessary

college credits can be a nonstarter. Besides the forfeited income from a full-time job, there's the expense of the education courses. Assuming tuition fees of $250 per credit hour, this could amount to a $15,000 investment.

According to the National Center for Alternative Certification, every state now has alternative certification programs for prospective teachers, including individuals at midcareer who lack the necessary educational requirements but have a bachelor's degree. At the time I was seeking certification, however, an alternative program wasn't a practical option.

Much of the national growth in alternative certification has occurred since 2000, according to the Center. But as far back as the mid-1980s, when there were news reports of expected teacher shortages, some states took action to combat the problem. School districts in New Jersey, for example, had the authority to train teachers so that they could receive provisional certificates. But these provisional and so-called emergency certificates created a different problem: teacher colleges didn't like the idea of school districts getting into the business of teacher education.[2]

In the 1990s, as the use of emergency and temporary certificates began to disappear, other nontraditional alternative certification routes were developed. These new routes included teacher colleges and universities as participants in the certification process. According to the Center, there are now 130 routes delivered through 485 sites. About 40 percent of new teachers in New Jersey now come from alternative routes. And in California and Texas, one-third of new teachers are certified through nontraditional programs.[3]

Missouri's alternative certification program was approved in 2001, and there are now three area colleges that offer it. Teacher candidates must sign a contract with the hiring school district, the recommending college or university, and the state department of education. And the school district must assign a mentor for the candidate and conduct an evaluation. There are other requirements, too, including the candidate's participation in the school's professional development activities, in-service training, and the completion of educational course work.[4]

I wish there had been such an alternative certification program in Kansas City in 1995. But given the fairly limited teacher education and certification routes that were available then, my final choice was easy. It was Rockhurst College (now called Rockhurst University), a small, urban Jesuit institution. Dr. Joan Caulfield, the chair of its education department, suggested I begin by taking a course on campus. After that experience, she would design an independent study program for me. I would come to feel a lot more comfortable in that independent program than I did in my single on-campus class. For one thing, the students were almost all young women who were less than half my age. As Mary remarked, "You're old enough to be their father."

My plan after leaving H&R Block was to be a part-time teacher and, concurrently, a part-time student. For scheduling purposes, taking independent study courses made this plan much more doable. That's because the independent study route exempted me from the regular classes on campus—but not from the regular course work. To satisfy each of the state-mandated course requirements, I would meet with my professors one-on-one, usually once or twice a week, and submit completed assignments according to a predetermined schedule.

My decision about where to teach was as easy as my decision to take courses at Rockhurst.

Sister Anne arranged for me to visit the Catholic schools in the inner city. One of them, St. Francis Xavier School (SFX), happened to be located directly across the street from Rockhurst College. Besides the obvious benefit of the two institutions' close proximity to each other, I was immediately impressed with SFX, even though the facility appeared somewhat neglected. The faculty and staff were welcoming, and the kids looked happy to be there. And it was a small school of about two hundred students, which appealed to me. I was also impressed with its principal, Dr. Lynne Beachner. She was gracious and pleasant. More important, I sensed in her a genuine concern for the students and their education.

I met with Lynne, and she was receptive to my idea of teaching middle school math part-time. Having never before been the one seeking

a job in an employment interview, I was thankful that she didn't make our meeting feel like one. Lynne actually seemed appreciative that I wanted to teach at her school. And perhaps she was even more appreciative when, after she informed me of the school's financial challenges, I told her I would work for nothing. I could hardly argue that I needed the money. When she told me I could have the job, I left SFX feeling as if I had just won the lottery.

SFX's history is comparable to other urban Catholic schools in Kansas City and around the country. For years, nuns had run the school and taught the students. But as the number of nuns dwindled, lay Catholics took their place. Before long, non-Catholics filled some of the open teaching positions. Now, perhaps for the first time since the school's founding, there would be a Jewish teacher.

There also weren't many Catholic *students* at the school when I joined the faculty. Changes in the demographics of both the neighborhood and the parish over the years had transformed the school population. In the 1950s, the congregation had some 1,200 families; now there were just 350.[5] Some members of the community had moved away from the urban center for the sprawling suburbs. Or they had relocated across the state line into Kansas, where the public school system was considerably better than that of Kansas City, Missouri. Despite these trends, I was impressed that a core group of committed SFX parishioners, along with its priest, Father Tim McMahon, were determined to keep the school open to serve the needs of the changing neighborhood.

SFX and Rockhurst were located on Troost Avenue, the street where white Kansas City uneasily met black Kansas City. With relatively few exceptions, whites lived on the west side of the street and blacks on the east. Although SFX was located on the white side, practically all the students now came from the black side. And the opposite was the case at Rockhurst; it was situated on the black side, even though nearly all its students were white.

"When I was a kid, my folks took the family to the Country Club Dairy on hot summer nights for ice cream," my dad remarked after I told him where SFX was located. The dairy, which opened in 1927, had

been within walking distance of SFX, just three blocks south on Troost Avenue. Back then, there was no dividing line; it was an all-white neighborhood. If one were to look around the neighborhood today, it would be hard to believe that this area was ever a vibrant center of commerce, let alone home to a popular ice cream shop.

But the state of the neighborhood wasn't a concern to me now. I simply felt fortunate that there was an inner-city school willing to take a chance on someone who didn't have a teacher's certificate or any urban teaching experience.

I would soon learn how the demographics of the neighborhood made it difficult for SFX to keep its doors open. Because SFX was a parochial—not a public—school, attending SFX meant that parents had to pay tuition. For many low-income families, that wasn't a realistic option. If parents had trouble making ends meet, how could they possibly afford to send their kids to a school that charged one or two thousand dollars per year?

There was a way. The Catholic diocese established a fund, called the Central City School Fund, to subsidize most of the tuition for low-income families. But parents still had to pay something, even if it wasn't much.

Generous philanthropic support from the community to subsidize tuition certainly helped, but it didn't completely solve the problem. It was still a challenge to attract enough students to fill all the classroom seats. This meant that the school administrators couldn't afford to be too selective in admitting students. As long as parents could pay a minimal amount of tuition and enough philanthropic dollars were available through the fund, their children would most likely be accepted.

Thus SFX was a study in contradictions. Its private status seemed to promise anxious parents that their children would receive an elite education. Yet, in reality, it was a struggle to educate students whose skills were all too often problematic at best.

Two months after leaving H&R Block, I was now set to take part in this struggle to educate inner-city kids. At least all my agonizing and all my choices were behind me.

CHAPTER

3 INTO THE TRENCHES

"THIS IS A FIRST," Mary remarked, as she, our two sons, and I were having breakfast together. "My three boys are off to school today."

She thought her observation was cute, but I wasn't amused. I had mixed feelings that morning. On the one hand, I couldn't wait to meet my very first students. On the other, I was a bit nervous, not knowing what to expect. It was almost how I felt before making my first presentation at the annual shareholders' meeting at H&R Block.

Mary sensed my nervousness. "It's okay to be nervous on the first day of school," she said, now trying to show some compassion.

"Yes, I know that," I replied. "But you're forgetting that I'm the teacher, not the student."

"Have a good day at school, guys," I told my sons after breakfast.

"You too, Dad," Jason responded.

On my drive to SFX that morning, I could hardly believe that after months of planning, this day was finally a reality. Considering what I had put myself through and, even more important, all that I had put H&R Block through, I felt self-imposed pressure to *make* this new career pay off.

As I walked in the front door, my fear subsided and somehow was replaced with confidence if not near-exuberance. For someone who usually tends to see the glass as half empty instead of half full, I was feeling uncharacteristically optimistic.

I walked upstairs to my classroom. It wasn't a real classroom and, to my knowledge, had never been used as one. Years earlier, the second

floor, now known as the Convent, had been the living quarters for the nuns who taught at the school. I would bet those nuns never dreamed that a Jewish teacher would someday occupy part of their former residence. Times had certainly changed.

It never bothered me that a crucifix hung on one wall of my makeshift classroom. But if there were one thing I could have changed in that room, it would have been the amount of lighting. I don't recall any windows, and the old ceiling fixtures produced only a dim glow. Below those insufficient lights were long tables arranged in a U shape, with small plastic student chairs tucked tightly underneath them. There was a restroom adjacent to the classroom, but because the operation of the toilet wasn't always dependable, the facilities on the first floor proved to be a better bet.

The principal had set up a small portable blackboard on a tripod. It wasn't fancy or high tech, but at least I had a way to show my students how to solve algebraic problems. The blackboard came from the "Dungeon," a huge storage room below the main floor of the building that was crammed with old classroom furniture, supplies, and who knows what else.

I remember walking into the Dungeon for the first time. It created in me something like the feeling that a kid pays to get from a commercial haunted house around Halloween. But this one seemed like the real McCoy . . . and it was free. It was also so dark that my classroom was a sunroom by comparison. Although there was an occasional light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the depth of the room was left to the imagination. I had once wanted to find out how deep it was, but I feared that someone might accidentally close and lock the door behind me. Thankfully, I never heard any horror stories about the Dungeon.

I was as ready as I could be, but there were still several minutes before my first class would begin. So I went back downstairs to the main floor and walked through the halls. Suddenly I heard a loud and angry voice. It was another teacher, fuming at her students.

"If I *ever* see you act that way again," she warned the class, "you'll be sorry! And don't think for a minute that I won't call your parents!" The kids were as quiet and motionless as statues.

I don't know what had precipitated that outburst, but as I continued on, I hoped I would never feel the need to react that way. She couldn't have been enjoying her job, at least not at that moment, and her students weren't enjoying her teaching either. I had a lot to learn, but at least I knew one thing: I didn't change careers just to lose my temper in front of a bunch of kids.

The bell rang. My first class was about to begin.

"Are you rich?"

I had welcomed my seventh-grade students—yes, *my* students. I had ticked off my list of class rules and expectations. I had done my best to make a good first impression, to come across as optimistic, supportive, and, above all else, interesting. But maybe I had succeeded too well, because now Leonard's question hung in the air.

No one had asked me that question . . . ever. And I didn't want to answer it then—for several reasons. Sure, it was a distraction. But it went deeper than that. I hardly knew my students. It was tough enough to discuss my personal worth with my own wife for the first time. Besides, their world and mine were so far apart. I suppose it was part sensitivity and part embarrassment. I grew up in an environment where one didn't talk about personal wealth, let alone flaunt it.

But no matter how adroitly I tried to parry them, the personal questions kept coming.

"Are you a millionaire?"

"Why did you quit?"

"Do you own H&R Block?"

Markis asked the most basic question of all: "Why did you give all that up just to teach?"

I knew the answer to that one. After all, I had spent months asking myself the same question. But I didn't want to get into it now.

"You're asking lots of good questions about H&R Block and me. I *will* answer them . . . but not today," I finally responded. "I want to learn something about *you*." And I did.

L'Chelle had the biggest, warmest smile in the room and wanted to be a doctor. There was no doubt in her mind—or mine—that she would have a successful career. She had it all—intelligence, a gregarious personality, and an abundance of confidence. Ja'Ree, in contrast, sat quietly, intently. She analyzed every word I said. Instead of contributing to the conversation, she soaked it all in, as if she were on the outside looking in. She was one of the few students I would ever have who lived with her dad, not her mom. Her mom had died, but I never learned how.

I knew from the outset that Tina would be a top student. She was articulate when she introduced herself, and she admitted in front of her classmates that she loved math. Little did I know then that she would send me an e-mail some ten years later inviting me to her college graduation.

In that e-mail, she would inform me that she also had taken a job as a math teacher in an urban school. "I have not forgotten the impact you have had on my life," she wrote, "and appreciate the continuing impact you are having on many more students after me. I feel honored that I was one of your first students. I talk about you to everyone, when ask[ed] why I like math so much and why I want to become a teacher."

At the moment, though, I wondered how long it would take me to remember these names, let alone spell or pronounce some of them. But I could see that they were great kids. They had been handpicked for this, my first class. They had potential, even though not all of them were performing at a seventh-grade level. My first impression was that teaching them would be a challenge. I didn't know it then, but they would turn out to be the least difficult class I would ever have.

As I began explaining the homework assignment, their facial expressions suggested that I had just committed a serious offense. "How can you give us homework on the first day?" Chartisha complained. She was in a state of shock, or else she was a darn good actress.

"There will be homework *every* day," I replied. But she didn't back down.

"Are you going to give homework over weekends, too? None of the other teachers give homework every day and over weekends."

I assured her that doing her work every day would pay great dividends, but Chartisha would have none of it. After rolling her eyes at me, she looked around to see if any of her classmates would support her cause. None of them did, fortunately, but I'm sure I would have lost if it had come to a vote.

The first assignment I gave them was to write a one-page paper titled "Math and Me." I told them they were free to write anything they wanted on the topic, provided it came from the heart. Those papers were fascinating, and they gave me more insight into each of my students, including their attitude toward math, school, and even life.

Ray was confident that he would use math after school to keep track of his fortune. He was an aspiring professional basketball player. He wasn't the only one with that career goal, but he clearly had his work cut out for him: he was the smallest kid in the class. Saada admitted that math was her least favorite subject and was sure that she would never use it. She planned to be a manicurist and someday own her own shop. She was disappointed when I explained that business owners must certainly know and use math.

Most of them spoke from the heart, but, unfortunately, some had difficulty writing complete sentences. Even worse, the spelling on some of the papers was atrocious. For a group of "advanced" students, these were disturbing revelations.

"So how did it go?" Mary asked when I arrived home.

"My students are anything but bashful," I said. Shy about speaking up in school as a kid, I told her that I wouldn't have said a single word on the first day of class, especially in front of a new teacher I didn't know. "These kids aren't intimated by anything or anyone."

A few days later, on Mary's birthday, I told the students that I was taking my family out for dinner to celebrate. "Where are you going?"

L'Chelle asked. I asked for their recommendations. It was almost unanimous: McDonald's or Red Lobster, I was advised. Taco Bell came in a close third. That night, I passed along their picks to Mary, who remained unconvinced.

My school experiences dominated our family dinner conversations. Jason or Teddy would ask, "Dad, what happened today at school?" I would reply at such length that Mary would finally interrupt by saying, "Tom, why don't you ask the boys about *their* day at school."

It didn't take long before Leonard asked me again if I was rich. Fortunately, I had an answer. "Yes, I'm rich," I declared and then paused. "I've got a great wife and two wonderful children."

"That's not what I meant," he rebutted. "You didn't understand my question, Mr. Bloch."

"I understood your question, Leonard, but I'm not sure you understand my answer," I replied.

I tried to convey in my response that all of us are rich in our own individual ways. You can be rich, for example, artistically, academically, or athletically—not just financially. I thought these kids already placed too much importance on money and possessions as it was.

Over the days that followed, the students and I became even more comfortable with one another. I also became more comfortable as a teacher. I experimented with new teaching strategies. I tried manipulatives, journal writing, and even competitive games.

I found that using cubes, tiles, and spinners can help kids develop a stronger understanding of basic concepts, in addition to making learning fun. But the primary advantage of manipulatives, I discovered, is that they can help bring abstract concepts into the physical world.

A writing journal served multiple purposes, too. First, it allowed students to develop their communication skills, which is important—even in math. It also helped them analyze and then try to explain in their own words math concepts that are difficult to understand. Their journals would serve as a useful reference tool, both for them and for me. I would review them periodically, which helped me in measuring my teaching effectiveness.

One simple adjustment that worked was to allot the last five or ten minutes of class for my students to begin their homework. That gave me a chance to work one-on-one with any who needed individual help. But to my exasperation, the kids still sometimes seemed less interested in what I was trying to teach than why I was there in the first place.

"Why are you teaching us when you could be making a lot more money at H&R Block?" Rinetta demanded while working on an assignment one day.

"To work with all of you, to help you learn," I replied. I could see that she was wanting more. "To see you succeed in school and maybe even in life would enrich me in a totally different kind of way," I added. This obviously didn't resonate with her—or anyone else.

"What could be better than making tons of money?" Markis demanded. Finally, I decided that if I couldn't turn off such questions, I would use them as a teaching tool. That was the beginning of a series of conversations we would have about happiness and the material world. Someone once said, "Life is tragic for those who have plenty to live on and nothing to live for." This was not a concept to which my students could yet relate.

"How many cars do you have, Mr. Bloch?" Leonard asked.

"Just one," I replied. "Of course, my wife has one, too."

"Why don't you have more than that?" he persisted.

"Because I only need one," I said. My students figured that owning multiple cars was both an important symbol of success and a source of contentment. The same was true about the size of one's house: the bigger, the better.

"Look at my diamond," Troy said to me one day, pointing to his new earring.

"It sure is big!" I remarked. It was clearly bigger than anything Richard Burton had given to Elizabeth Taylor.

He was proud of it, although I knew it wasn't real. As excited as he was when he first got it, less than a month later it was never to be seen again.

"Where's that new earring of yours, Troy?" I asked him one day. He had no comment. The expression on his face suggested that he had lost

interest in it. We talked about how people lose interest in their new toys or other possessions. There's always a newer model and a bigger one that we think we must have.

I suppose I went into teaching believing that, at least in theory, my job was to keep all my students engaged in learning all the time. Events quickly disabused me of that notion.

"THIS IS BORING!" Ja'Ree blurted out in the middle of class. That hurt . . . especially because I knew she was right. It was then that I understood exactly what the author and educator William Arthur Ward meant when he said, "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires."[1] I wasn't inspiring—and I wasn't even sure that I was demonstrating at this point.

I realized that I couldn't rely on a steady diet of textbook-based lessons and direct instruction. So I took the kids outside one day for a group project. We went across the street to the quad at the urban campus of Rockhurst College, where there were a number of beautiful old trees. I challenged the kids to estimate the heights of trees by first comparing the length of their own shadows to the shadows of the trees.

It was a disaster. They were more interested in walking around the campus, checking out what the college students were wearing. They learned next to nothing, but I certainly learned my lesson: I had to do a better job of preparing them to work in groups. That involved defining and clearly communicating expectations for each phase of the group work, including project outcomes.

They did better when we went outdoors another day to estimate and then measure various distances and then convert those distances to other units of measurement. We tried other nontextbook exercises. We computed distances from one city to another using a map of the United States. (Finding states and cities on the map was the toughest part for these kids. Their geography skills were wanting, and, not surprisingly, many of the children had scarcely been out of the state.)

We even learned how to prepare a simple tax return on Form 1040EZ. (Here was one subject about which I definitely felt confident that I knew something.) Most of the kids were fascinated to learn how

our income tax system works. They were interested in knowing that high-income people are taxed at a higher percentage rate than low-income people. I loved watching them bent over their desks, subtracting the standard deduction from their fictitious adjusted gross income. At the end, they were proud to sign and date their returns, declaring that, to the best of their knowledge, each was true, correct, and complete. They were excited to show their moms their first tax returns.

"Will you help me get a job at H&R Block?" Leonard asked.

"Call me after you graduate from college," I replied.

My students showed me that the best way to learn taxes is by doing taxes, not merely by committing rules and regulations to memory. John Holt, a leader in the home-schooling movement, said, "Most people would say that what I am doing is 'learning to play' the cello. But these words carry into our minds the strange idea that there exists two very different processes: 1) learning to play the cello; and 2) playing the cello. . . . We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way."[2]

I had confidently expected that the performance of my kids would steadily improve. So I was dismayed to discover that in fact a few of them were doing less and less homework with each passing week. Grades began to fall, and the kids blamed me. One student transferred out of the advanced class, and I absolutely hated to see her leave.

It was Chartisha. After deciding to leave, she didn't talk to me or even make eye contact when I passed her in the hallway. It appeared that she was mad at me, but I think she was actually mad at herself. Chartisha knew she had the ability to succeed in my class, but she simply chose not to do the work. Lack of effort, not lack of ability, was usually the reason I gave a student an F.

Max Forman, a special education consultant for the California Department of Education, observed that "Education seems to be in America the only commodity of which the customer tries to get as little as he can for his money."[3] Chartisha was one such customer.

None of my students in that first year received an F. But it was a different story after that. Still, I never got used to giving F's. Sometimes they made *me* feel as if I were a failure, yet I gave them anyway. I have

known and worked with teachers who refused to give F's as a matter of principle. "No child should receive an F. It would hurt his or her self-esteem," one teacher told me sternly. I disagreed then, and I disagree now. "Social promotion" does a kid no favors. School, like life, should be a real-world experience.

Sometimes the F worked as a wake-up call. After I failed Chase in math for the whole year, he wanted to switch to another school. But his mother wouldn't let him, and he returned the next year with a completely different attitude. That second year still wasn't at all easy for him. There was a period when his grade dipped to a very low D. I sent a progress report home to his mom. Chase returned it to me the next day with a note from her. "HE CAN'T FAIL AGAIN!" she had written in large, bold letters. I took this as a warning. So did Chase, thankfully.

Experiences like the one with Chase and his mother were also a wake-up call of sorts for me. They demonstrated how valuable parental involvement is in the educational process, a lesson that would be reinforced over and over again. I learned early on that I would have to make a concerted effort to continually reach out to parents. Initially, the telephone was the best way to initiate contact, assuming work and home numbers in the school's database were up-to-date. On occasion I would call to request a face-to-face conference at the school, usually with the student present. Now that practically all parents have cell phones and e-mail access, it's much easier to reach them.

In today's information age, merely mailing report cards home quarterly is wholly inadequate for parents who want to know how their children are progressing. I used to send progress reports home with the students every couple of weeks, and many parents came to expect and appreciate those regular updates. Now I encourage parents to access the school's Web site, where they can view up-to-the-minute reports for each class twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. With the push of a button from work or home, they can find out the most recent test score and whether any homework assignments are missing. Technology has greatly enhanced and simplified parent-teacher communications.

But sometimes my efforts to reach out to parents made no difference at all, nor would an F on the report card. Jerald, for example, was an angry, disrespectful, and volatile kid. He refused to work, and he refused to follow directions. One day, a wadded-up ball of paper hit my back as I worked at the blackboard, then two more, and finally a fourth that missed. I was pretty sure who had instigated that incident: it had to be Jerald. As the year went on, I tried everything I could with him. I met with him one-on-one. I temporarily removed him from class. I sent him to the principal and the counselor. Finally, I met with his mother.

Only then did I learn that Jerald's father had been shot and killed the year before. That hideous incident had torn apart Jerald's entire life. His mother seemed not just sad but defeated. She didn't think there was anything that could turn his life around. I continued to try to work with him, but he shut me out completely, rarely saying a word or looking me in the eye. Jerald failed my class, and he didn't return the next year. I never learned where he went or what happened to him.

Another boy, Akeem, was a really bright kid, but he rarely turned in a homework assignment. His mother never attended parent-teacher conferences, either. "Do you think you'll be able to get a decent job if you don't try to learn and do your work at school?" I demanded.

"Maybe not," he replied, "but I don't care." My conversations with Akeem reminded me of the African proverb, "Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse." I never saw Akeem again after the school year ended.

It was not uncommon for parents who transferred their kids to SFX from other schools to be unaware that their children lacked basic skills that should have been mastered years earlier. Many were understandably upset—with themselves as much as the previous school—when they received the unwelcome news. But it was heartening when Tamela's mom expressed gratitude when I alerted her early in the year that her seventh-grade daughter struggled with basic two-digit multiplication and division. More encouragingly, she wasted no time in asking a retired neighbor to work with Tamela after school. That made a tremendous

difference. A few years later, I ran into Tamela's mom at a shopping mall. She thanked me again and informed me that her daughter was excelling in high school calculus.

But nothing was quite as memorable as something that happened on the last school day of my first year.

With just minutes remaining before the summer break, all eyes were fixed on the clock on the classroom wall. Javonne raised her hand. "Can I come to the front of the room, Mr. Bloch?" she asked with a hint of trepidation in her voice. She did so and stood next to me, obviously a bit nervously. Although I admired her courage, I wondered what she was about to do or say.

After taking a deep breath, Javonne addressed her classmates in a quiet yet deliberate tone. "I used to hate math," she began. "I wasn't any good at it, so I just gave up. Then Mr. Bloch came to my school and was my teacher. He helped me understand math. Now it's my favorite subject. I'm still not very good at it. But at least I can get by, thanks to Mr. Bloch."

The students were as quiet and attentive as I could ever remember as Javonne turned toward me and pulled an object out of the front pocket of her pants. She presented me with a small ceramic apple, about three inches high and with the words "Greatest Teacher" inscribed on it. It probably cost less than a dollar, but I couldn't wait to get home and tell Mary.

"I received my year-end bonus," I said to her with a serious face. Mary looked at me as if I had (once again) lost my mind. Then I showed her the apple, which meant more to me than any year-end bonus I had received at H&R Block. That inexpensive gift continues to be one of my most prized possessions; twelve years later, it still occupies a prominent place in my office.

That night, I replayed Javonne's kind words in my head before going to sleep. I now thought I would never again second-guess my decision to leave H&R Block.

But in fact I would.

CHAPTER

4 ON THE LEARNING CURVE

AFTER MY FIRST YEAR at SFX, the main math teacher in the middle school left to take a position at a local high school. Principal Lynne Beachner offered me an opportunity to fill the vacancy, which meant I would now teach more classes and more grades. It also meant that I would graduate to a real classroom, out of the dark, dreary, and—as an urban legend had it—haunted Convent.

With my expanded role, I received a teacher's contract for the 1996–97 academic year. It didn't surprise me that my annual compensation as a part-time teacher was about equal to the amount I earned as a CEO—for just one week. I had to remind myself that I didn't change careers for the money and that, in any event, I intended to donate my earnings back to the school. Still, it was reassuring to know that my services were valued.

Having my own classroom came with a responsibility to create a physical environment conducive to learning. Ordinarily, this wouldn't have seemed particularly important to me, if it weren't for the other teachers on my wing who took classroom appearance so seriously. They even purchased decorative items with money out of their own pockets. (I later learned how common it is for teachers to use their own money for classroom supplies.)

The other teachers created color-coordinated bulletin boards with perfectly mounted borders. One depicted famous Americans. Another classroom exhibited posters that reinforced class rules: "We follow directions" and, perhaps offered more in a spirit of hope than one of

realism, "We will stay on task without disturbing or distracting others." Welcoming signs blossomed on most every door. But three weeks before the start of school, there was nothing on my door. And there was nothing in my classroom but some old desks, old chairs, and old textbooks.

In search of guidance, I asked a fellow teacher how she acquired her classroom accessories. I shouldn't have been surprised in this era of retail specialization that she directed me to a store in town that caters to teachers. The place was huge, and I had no trouble finding items that would make my room conform to the others. But before I hung anything on the walls, it was clear that they needed a coat of paint—one more subdued than the existing color, a truly startling green. I chose tranquil beige, which I hoped would help create a warm and calming atmosphere.

The school's administration offered to supply the paint—as long as the teachers were willing to apply it. Having never painted anything since kindergarten, I was almost tempted to hire a professional. But I opted for a different plan: I recruited an assistant painter in the form of my ten-year-old son, Jason. (At least he had been in kindergarten more recently than I had.) It certainly wasn't a perfect strategy, but he and I were quite proud of the finished product.

Jason also lent a hand when I laid out my classroom. Now in fifth grade and having spent more time recently in classrooms than I had, he was an old hand at such things. I found that placing students at individual desks arranged in rows, as Jason recommended, was most conducive to self-directed work.

I still have a mental image of the students who looked up at me from those desks on opening day. In my mind's eye, all are smiling and all are hopeful. All seem equally promising. Their futures are still before them, and anything seems possible.

But the smiles masked deep gaps in ability and deep disparities in background.

Smiling Tessa, for example, had fetal alcohol syndrome. She simply couldn't do the work or stay on task. Cheerful Carter showed up for after-school tutoring only because he didn't have anything better to do;

his primary motivation was companionship, not scholarship. Sophia attended tutoring only because her mother forced her to attend. It didn't do much good because Sophia didn't do any work.

Still, all my students clearly had potential, and as the school year unfolded, it was a pleasure to watch most of them progress and grow.

There was Martez, a live wire and born actor who played the ill-fated dentist, Dr. Farb, in a school production of *Little Shop of Horrors*.

There was Rochana, an African American who, on a field trip to the Kansas City branch office of the National Archives, discovered that her biological grandfather, whom she had never met, was white.

And there was Jayden, who was moved to conclude after one history lesson that "the Jews had it worse than the slaves did."

Like the children, the parents were a mixed lot. Inner-city parents are acutely aware that good grades are the ticket to a better life for their children. But some seem to view good grades as an entitlement rather than as something to be earned. I actually heard that a very angry mother, in full view of the kids at dismissal time, had punched one of the priests in the face.

For self-defense and the security of our classrooms, SFX teachers devised a secret code. An announcement over the intercom that "Sister Elizabeth is in the building" was a warning that trouble was on the way—usually some sort of disturbance in the hallway—and that we should quietly lock the classroom doors.

Years later, Janel, a fellow teacher who had deliberately left an elite parochial school to come to SFX and its underprivileged kids, compared working there to "doing mission work." Asked what coping strategies teachers used, she jokingly added with a laugh: "We went to Mike's [bar] a lot."

Janel was a language arts and literature teacher at SFX's middle school and someone I admired for her uncommon dedication to kids. She still has it. Today she continues that commitment as a Title I teacher in an urban school district. (Title I is the nation's largest federally funded program for schools, designed to help kids improve their performance in reading and math.)

Janel emphasizes that most of our kids were talented. "They just needed to be pushed and given opportunities to strive for success at a challenging level." And most parents of those kids genuinely wanted them to succeed, a concern that could manifest itself in touching ways.

Once, for example, our school took kids on a field trip to Wildwood, an outdoor education program. For some of our students, it was their first experience out of the city, where they could walk through forests and meadows and see wildlife. Only afterward did we learn that one student, Amber, went on the trip despite the fact that her father had passed away over the weekend. Her mother had postponed the funeral so that her daughter could go.

And so my second year of teaching began. With my strategically placed store-bought accessories hanging on freshly painted walls and cabinets, my classroom looked remarkably similar to the others. But I soon came to the conclusion that looking just like the other classrooms was undesirable: it simply felt impersonal. I decided that student-created artwork would improve the ambiance. So this time I went to an office supply store, not a teacher supply store, to purchase poster boards. As an extra-credit project, I asked my students to use colored markers to visually depict on their posters how math might connect with the vision they had of their future. The works not only showed creative talent but also offered marvelous insight into the students' aspirations.

Anna, a wannabe lawyer, created the scales of justice. She carefully illustrated various math skills (prime factorization, the distributive property, square roots) carefully balanced on one scale or the other in order to keep them in equilibrium. Warren depicted three-dimensional right circular cylinders, rectangular prisms, and practically every other conceivable geometric solid in vivid colors. These representations cost me much less than the items I purchased at the teacher supply store, but to me they were priceless. They were one-of-a-kind masterpieces. The result was that whereas other teachers periodically redecorated

their classrooms to coincide with new units of study, I became too attached to my students' work to take anything down.

My second year was proving more satisfying than the first. For one thing, I didn't experience the same kind of agonizing as I did just before the previous year. I now knew what to expect, and I had learned the basics of teaching in an urban middle school. I began to experiment and innovate.

There's one main challenge to teaching students with widely varying skills who are not grouped by ability: there just isn't enough time during the regular class period to bring all of them up to speed. To help those performing below grade level, I offered after-school tutoring. This was especially important for those kids who couldn't get help with math at home.

I wish we had known then about an excellent program in Kansas and Missouri called YouthFriends, which recruits community volunteers to mentor kids in schools. The program began as a small pilot in Kansas City during my first year as a teacher. Since then, more than twenty-seven thousand mentors have served over two hundred thousand kids in almost a hundred school districts. This is a wonderful opportunity both for students who need extra help and for community volunteers who want to give help.

I tried another new tactic during parent-teacher conferences. I asked the students themselves to lead the discussions. I was surprised and impressed to hear them give their parents open and honest self-assessments. And I later learned that it's also advantageous to include all of the core subject teachers in a parent-teacher-student conference rather than conduct separate meetings with individual teachers. When all of the child's teachers gather together to discuss a student's performance, they tend to support their colleagues and build from each other's ideas and approaches. Parents also were more inclined to accept constructive criticism coming from a group rather than a single teacher.

As I concentrated on developing my own skills in the classroom, I was also focused on completing the teacher preparation program at Rockhurst University.

I never wondered more about the value of all those economics courses I had taken in the mid-1970s than when I was notified that only a few of my old college credits would apply toward a teaching certificate. I now had to complete fourteen additional undergraduate courses to become a certified teacher. Then I had to complete the student teaching component. And the final requirement, which I met in November 1997, was to pass the national standardized test for beginning teachers.

As I look back, the most interesting courses I took were those that gave me an opportunity to observe and work in area classrooms. There was a literacy practicum at an inner-city public school that involved working with fourth graders who were nonreaders. The number of kids who still couldn't read at this age amazed me. There was another practicum in which I assisted a fifth-grade teacher at a brand-new suburban school.

One day at the suburban school, a boy was disruptive as I tried to direct a class project. When I returned the next day, he handed me an almost too-polished note. "Please forgive me for my poor behavior yesterday. . . . Teachers are very important people. We need them. Our lives would be thrown away without teachers. . . . I won't do it again." As much as I appreciated the note, I was skeptical that the apology was actually his idea or that the misbehavior he had displayed wouldn't reappear. I was right on both counts.

On my last day of the practicum, a different student gave me a handmade card. This one certainly looked authentic—in one sense, depressingly authentic. He wrote, "Your [*sic*] a terfic [*sic*] person . . . I like you. I wish you didn't have to go. But if wishes were fishes we all would be eating seafood. Do you theach [*sic*] 6 grade?"

My own teacher education was tailor made, including independent study classes taken under the supervision of Dr. Joan Caulfield. Joan has an impressive background in education as a middle and high school urban teacher, a middle and high school principal, and the associate superintendent of the Kansas City, Missouri School District. The curriculum she designed for me included education of the exceptional child, classroom management, and educational psychology.

Joan is delightfully unconventional, a true freethinker. She doesn't think inside the box—or outside the box, either. Her former boss and past president at Rockhurst, Father Tom Savage, taught her that neither approach is satisfactory because in both cases, one is still conscious of the box. Rather, she thinks *beyond* the box.

"We have wonderful schools now—for the 1950s," Joan says. "But we are living in the twenty-first century. . . . We are teaching our kids factoids and not the big picture. . . . We need to teach kids how to think creatively."

Joan prides herself on doing that. She's a disciple of John Dewey, the twentieth-century intellectual famous for his philosophy of pragmatism. Dewey advocated a progressive model of education in which teachers rely less on structured activities in favor of more experiential opportunities for kids to learn.

"The brain doesn't learn compartmentalized," Joan says. "The kids go to English class and they have English. Then they go to history class, and they don't see the connection between English and history." To address this problem, Joan founded the Center for Advancement of Reform in Education, also known by its initials, CARE, and I have profited by attending some of CARE's annual conferences to hear international experts report on the latest brain research. But what has been at least as enlightening to me was simply observing urban school classrooms with Joan and listening to her assess what was and wasn't working.

The typical beginning teacher also has a big lesson to learn, Joan says. The lesson is that most kids won't conform to the teacher's unconscious expectations.

"A lot of people who become teachers were . . . the precious little kids who sat there and did everything the teacher asked," she explains. "So that's what they dream of in their own classrooms; they see themselves directing children like themselves. But the reality is that sometimes children can be beastly, and you've got to know how to deal with it."

Like Joan, Arthur Levine, the former president of the Teachers College at Columbia University, argues that "the nation's teacher education programs are inadequately preparing their graduates to meet the realities

of today's standards-based, accountability-driven classrooms, in which the primary measure of success is student achievement."[1]

But Levine does more than criticize the status quo. He offers five interesting and perhaps controversial recommendations:

1. Education schools should break out of the arts and sciences mold in order to become more like a professional school. Just as medical students spend a considerable amount of time practicing in an actual hospital, it takes the same sort of real-world practice for preservice teachers to become good practitioners.
2. The primary measure of teacher education should not be the academic achievement of the new teacher but rather the academic achievement of the new teacher's students. In the real world, student achievement is how a teacher's effectiveness is measured.
3. Teacher education programs should be five years in length. As Levine says, they ought to be configured as "an enriched major" instead of some "watered-down version of traditional undergraduate concentration." With the extra year, teacher education students would also complete a traditional major, such as math or history, so that they gain content mastery.
4. Accreditation should be based on actual student achievement. This would require states to evaluate how well the students of new teachers are performing on standardized tests. Having access to this data would help schools of education determine their programs' effectiveness.
5. Close down unsuccessful education programs, expand successful ones, and give scholarships to attract outstanding candidates.[2]

Here's a final point about teacher education, and one of my pet peeves: too many new teachers are coming out of education school lacking even the most basic grammar and writing skills. Now, I'm not suggesting that biology, trigonometry, and visual arts teachers must remember how to diagram a sentence. But no teacher should say, "Me and her are going to the lunchroom," or write in a parent newsletter,

"Students must wear *there* uniforms on the field trip." I've seen and heard too many examples of these kinds of errors.

One afternoon recently, Janel, my former colleague at SFX, and I reminisced over our years together and caught up on what has become of the students we taught a decade ago.

Warren, a bright kid who seemed to enjoy sketching cylinders more than solving math problems, is now an architect.

Harrison is now training to be a commercial airline pilot.

Zara went on to study at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Not all stories had happy endings. I was devastated to learn that one of our former students had been accused of murder. I had always worried about that kid, a paradoxical combination of a winning smile and a volatile temper.

Offsetting this tragedy, for me, is the heartwarming story of Tina, a smiling, conscientious student who has become, like me, a math teacher. I caught up with her over coffee one recent afternoon.

Tina, who immigrated with her family to the United States from India, had impressed me from the beginning. She was not only a model student but a fine human being—unfailingly cheerful and conscientious. She recalls that even as a child in India, she wanted to become a teacher and would play teacher the way some kids played doctor. I was gratified to hear her say that I had helped cement that decision.

"You made me feel special," she said. In college, one professor advised her and other prospective teachers to be stern: "Don't smile before Christmas." I'm glad that she seems to have taken the opposite lesson from me.

"You were the first time I didn't feel threatened by a teacher," she told me. "When you saw me making a mistake on an algebra problem, you wouldn't say anything. You'd just come and point to my paper." Now she uses the same technique with her own students.

Happy, successful graduates are a teacher's finest reward. But, in addition, I felt during that second year of teaching the satisfaction of

gradually moving up the learning curve. Indeed, each of my five years at SFX helped me inch up that arc. This was confirmed when the principal wrote on my first formal teacher evaluation form: "Tom, thanks so much for your commitment to the children of SFX. Our math program has been greatly improved because of your efforts."

I wouldn't trade for anything the opportunity I received at SFX. It was an education—for me as much as for the kids. But, more than that, it was a gift.

CHAPTER

5 A QUESTION OF CHARACTER

"F— YOU, MR. BLOCH!" At least Antonio called me *Mr.* Bloch.

"I didn't say that," Antonio later argued when I confronted him in front of the principal. Now he was lying to the principal and me.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been upset by either the four-letter word or the lie. By then I had already discovered that profanity was common among my seventh and eighth graders. So was lying. A national survey of middle and high school youth by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a Los Angeles–based nonprofit organization, suggested that lying was the norm, not the exception. The survey found that 62 percent of students admitted that they had lied to a teacher within the past year about something significant. As high as that figure might appear, it's still less than the 82 percent who admitted they had lied about something significant to a parent.[1]

Cheating is as common as lying. The same survey found that 60 percent cheated during a test at school within the past year. Given my own experience as a teacher, I'm not surprised by that statistic.

The first time I caught a student cheating was when Reggie was doing a makeup test. Underneath his scratch paper was the already graded test of one of his classmates.

"I wasn't using it!" he cried. "I promise. I had just used it to study." Then why was it conveniently hidden on top of his desk? And why were the answers on the two identical?

Over the years, I'm sure many of my students got away with cheating. With twenty to thirty kids in a class, it's impossible for a teacher to

detect every offense. Some students are masters at it. But not Kareem, who sat next to Sandrelle. Their test answers were also identical—most of them identically wrong.

Another of my pet peeves was disrespect for the environment. I'm not a fanatical environmentalist, but I was always struck by the intentional disregard some students displayed for the school building, its hallways and classrooms, and indeed the neighborhood itself.

One day I went outside to discover Jordan and Arthur hanging onto a tree branch near the school. Using all their weight, they were trying their best to break it off. When I stopped them, they looked at me as if I were a nut that had fallen from the tree. "It's just a tree," Arthur protested.

Just how should a teacher respond to cheating, lying, and vandalism? Almost daily, I groped for an answer—a balance—just as countless other teachers must do in classrooms around the nation. Maybe I'm a softie, but I have to admit that I was never completely comfortable with punishment as a solution. Nor do I think that punishment alone works very well.

Sure, I gave Reggie an F for cheating on that particular exam. This was my policy if I had ironclad proof. And I sent disruptive students who were out of control to a "time-out" in the hallway or to the principal's office.

But these were easy calls to make. What was much harder to address was a whole range of what might be called "gray area" incidents. For better or worse, I generally chose not to make a federal case of suspected cheating, when I lacked solid proof. I also tended not to report run-of-the-mill behavioral problems to parents—because in truth, sometimes the parents just got angry at me, making the situation worse.

Once, for example, I told Carrie's mom that her daughter used profanity in the classroom. "Carrie would *never* do such a thing!" she insisted. Then came her warning: "I'll be attending your class tomorrow to evaluate your teaching." But she never came—ever.

Disrespect, lying, and cheating are just a few of the moral challenges a teacher faces. There are plenty of others, including drugs, violence, theft, and vandalism. Together, they put enormous stress on our

educational system in general and on teachers in particular. Moreover, they set the stage for even more tragic consequences in the future.

The data around this issue indicate some troubling trends. In 1933, 75 percent of deaths among youth between fifteen and nineteen years old were due to natural causes. Sixty years later, 80 percent resulted from homicide and unintentional injury.[2]

The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University reported on a study showing that nearly one out of five eighth graders had drunk alcohol in the past month, as did more than one-third of tenth graders. The same study showed that almost half of twelfth graders were current drinkers.[3]

Another study, this one from the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University, investigated the incidence of cheating in college. It found that on most college campuses, 70 percent of students admitted to some cheating.[4]

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that it's not enough for schools to simply teach core subjects. They must also teach core values.

I know this is a controversial idea. Some people question whether in a diverse, multicultural society, schools should be in the values business. I think they absolutely must, if only to help offset the corrosive aspects of our larger culture. Other than parents and religious institutions, what institution in society is better positioned to teach these things? One class per week won't cut it; the effort must involve every science, art, physical education, language arts, foreign language, history, and math class. I believe that schools must do this every day.

Theodore Roosevelt put it very well: "To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society."

I wondered how I could teach kindness, compassion, respect, and responsibility—in addition to teaching math. At a minimum, I knew it was important to consistently model these values in the classroom. But that wasn't enough.

I read Thomas Lickona's book *Educating for Character.* His theme is to develop a stronger "moral sense" in our children. His book identifies

ten indicators that underscore the depth of the problem: violence and vandalism, stealing, cheating, disrespect for authority, peer cruelty, bigotry, bad language, sexual precocity and abuse, increasing self-centeredness and declining civic responsibility, and self-destructive behavior. In addition to identifying the problems, he offers practical classroom strategies to teach respect and responsibility.[5]

I tried to model character traits and life skills while also teaching algebra. Each week, we focused on one trait or skill—for example, empathy, teamwork, self-respect, honesty, and fairness—which I would post on the board. We would talk about how cheating undermines one's self-respect as well as respect for others. I tried to emphasize that our classroom was a community and that each of us had a moral obligation to treat each other as a valued member of this community.

Emphasizing moral values raised questions—some of them uncomfortably close to home. Tonya asked why some people are born in poverty while others inherit fortunes. The best I could do in response was to say that regardless of our own station in life, there are always people who are less fortunate than we are. As the old proverb goes, "I complained because I had no shoes, until I met a man with no feet."

My students often addressed questions like these from a religious perspective. Indeed, most of them seemed to come from highly religious families. When I called parents and got their answering machines, the recorded messages often ended with "Have a blessed day."

I was encouraged when Lanesha's mom indicated that my efforts were bearing fruit. "She talks about you every night at home," she told me at a parent-teacher conference. "It's Mr. Bloch this, Mr. Bloch that. And I'm glad you're not just teaching math, but life skills, too."

Moral deficits are not limited to inner-city schools. They exist in every neighborhood school, in kids of all ages, and in high-, middle-, and low-income families. Even at the private college prep school that my sons attended, there were occasional incidents of theft, vandalism, and drug use.

In visiting schools, I've noticed that it's not unusual to see posters in classrooms and halls that highlight values. But that isn't enough. Those posters must be brought to life inside and outside the classroom.

I've been in faculty meetings where the idea of character education drew a decidedly mixed reception. One argument against it is that it dilutes the academic focus. I believe that just the opposite is true: the two support each other.

A stronger moral sense among students leads to fewer distractions in the classroom, which in turn produces more learning time. As is true of most educational programs, the success of any character education or citizenship recognition initiative depends on the teachers who implement it. The ones who really believe in and care about the programs make them work. Caring is the operative word.

As a teacher, I finally came to a fundamental realization, one that shaped my approach to teaching from that point forward. I realized that the best way to teach students to care is not to lecture them about caring. It is to give them real-world opportunities to express caring through action. There is—and I'm sure has always been—plenty of talk about how kids are responsible for many of society's awful problems. So why not make them part of the solution? Let *them* solve those problems.

I began to ponder how to "institutionalize" this concept in classrooms and schools. One way is by implementing community service as an integral part of the curriculum. Some schools already require it, of course, but the amount required varies widely from school to school. And some schools don't require community service at all.

I spent some late nights surfing the Internet to gain further insight into the relationship between service and schooling. There's plenty of data and commentary on the topic of student service. According to the Prudential Spirit of Community Survey, 95 percent of high school students say it's important to volunteer their time. Yet 70 percent say students aren't doing a good job of it.[6]

I discovered a Web site for a program called the President's Student Service Challenge.[7] There were two components of the program. One awarded a pin, a presidential certificate, and a letter from the president to youths ages five to twenty-five who contributed fifty or one hundred hours of community service in a year. The second component offered each high school an annual opportunity to select two students to receive

$1,000 college scholarships for outstanding service to the community. Half of the funds for each scholarship came from the Corporation for National and Community Service, and a local match was required for the other half.

I showed Mary the Web site, and she was equally intrigued with the program. We contacted the executive director of the nonprofit organization that administered the President's Challenge, and he agreed to meet with us. Together, we began to develop a local initiative to support the national program.

Mary and I decided that one crucial element was missing: a tangible incentive for schools to adopt and promote the program. So we developed a recognition component for schools, which we called the School of Service Award. Any participating school in which 5 percent of the students earned the President's Student Service Award would receive our School of Service Award. We would present them with a plaque and banner.

In 1999, Mary and I established the Youth Service Alliance of Greater Kansas City. Our mission was simple: to encourage community service through school-based recognition and support programs. We believe our program was then unique in the country.

To kick things off, we convened a meeting of most of the superintendents in the Kansas City metropolitan area. We asked each to enlist two schools to participate with us in a test program. Mary and I offered to fund the local match required to receive the national college scholarships.

Forty-six elementary, middle, and high schools participated in the 1999–2000 academic year. Of those, thirty earned the School of Service Award. We were elated that fifteen hundred students from the participating schools earned the President's Student Service Award. Twelve college scholarships were also awarded.

After that successful test, we were anxious to expand the program. Mary contacted five foundations to help underwrite the cost of the scholarship matches. She received support from each of them.

Our program was gaining momentum. The *Kansas City Star* gave it a welcome boost with a heartwarming article. It highlighted a middle

school student who completed about five hundred hours of service at a care center, even though she had intended to stop after reaching the one-hundred-hour level. "I saw how much other people were benefiting from the help I was providing and how it really touched them, so I decided to keep going," she said. "Everyone should get into this. The feeling you get from the smiles on their faces is just overwhelming."[8]

An assistant principal was quoted in the same article. "It's a great project. And it reinforces what we teach in the classroom. The goal wasn't to win the award; the goal was to serve."

During its second year, our program more than doubled in size. We were told then that more students from Kansas City had received this presidential recognition than in any other city in the United States. The executive director of the President's Challenge decided that our program deserved to be replicated in other cities. A former CEO of the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, which supported the Youth Service Alliance, used our program as a prototype to create a similar one in Cape Cod, where he currently resides. A woman in Seattle read about the program in Mary's high school alumni magazine. She then started a school-based student service initiative in her community.

In 2002, the *Kansas City Star* saluted our program in an editorial. "The community is lucky to have the Youth Service Alliance," it said. "The success of this program has been phenomenal."[9] The following year, the *Star* could observe that "Volunteerism has spread among area students and has made Kansas City a national model for the youth-driven efforts to give back to the community."[10]

We held annual celebrations to recognize the award-winning Schools of Service. Scholarship recipients were honored at the celebrations and were asked to speak about their service experiences. Their comments were always the highlight of these affairs.

One high school senior spoke eloquently about how turning the focus away from himself and toward those less fortunate made him a happier and better person. Another talked about how she had started a service club at her school that met every week after school. Its members identified worthwhile service projects in the community in

which to engage as a club activity. Still another senior explained how her postgraduation plans had changed because of her volunteer service in a nursing home. She had discovered that she enjoyed working with the elderly. "I'm going to nursing school next year," she announced with excitement and determination.

Many of the student service activities were performed in groups. One contingent of high school students spent a weekend cleaning up an inner-city park that had been neglected for years. They trimmed trees and hauled off trash. They took "before" and "after" pictures, and the difference was dramatic. They transformed it into a real park again, a place that residents could enjoy. These kids learned that they *can* make a difference. The more Mary and I heard stories like these, the more we were motivated to expand our program.

In the 2003–04 school year, 163 schools participated, 90 of which earned the School of Service Award. More than five thousand area students earned the President's Student Service Award. Thirty-two scholarships were matched.

After five years, our program was perhaps becoming too successful. Overseeing and promoting it was beginning to demand more time than Mary and I could give. We decided that the essence of the program could now survive on its own—without the Youth Service Alliance or us. We are happy that dozens of area schools have built community service into their curriculum.

Mary and I were especially pleased that our sons' private school participated in the program and that both boys earned the President's Student Service Award multiple times. Both Jason and Teddy's service included maintaining the Web site for the Youth Service Alliance. They also tutored my students at SFX in math, which meant a great deal to me. As private school students, they were part of a school-to-school partnership I had initiated. Teddy even received a grant from his school to coordinate a similar tutoring partnership with another inner-city school, one that serves a large low-income, Spanish-speaking population.

I enjoyed watching the interaction between the high school tutors, including Jason and Teddy, and my middle school students. Despite

coming from such different socioeconomic backgrounds, they bonded. The tutors often brought snacks to share with the students they helped. Whenever a tutor was unable to come due to a scheduling conflict or illness, I could see the disappointment in my students' faces.

Collectively, such programs make a huge difference. A federal survey conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, and INDEPENDENT SECTOR found that an estimated 15.5 million young people—or 55 percent of youth from twelve to eighteen years old—volunteer. According to the survey, more than a third of young people volunteer as part of a school activity. It also indicated that a young person from a family in which at least one parent volunteers is almost twice as likely to volunteer as one without any family members who volunteer.[11]

But does community service improve the quality of education? Research shows that service learning—connecting community service to the classroom—does indeed augment the educational process. One study indicates improvements in problem-solving skills and attitudes toward learning, and another shows a positive correlation to test scores. Data also suggest that service learning improves attendance rates and results in a reduction in discipline problems. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, service learning "can have positive impacts on youth in three general areas: academic engagement and achievement; civic attitudes and behaviors; and social and personal skills."[12]

The tutors that came to SFX weren't paid a dime. Nor were they told they must give their time each week to help the kids; most kept coming even after they had surpassed the sixty-hour service requirement imposed by their school. They came because they wanted to be there. They came because they cared—and caring, I believe, is the first step toward teaching kids not only how to make a living but how to live their lives.

CHAPTER

6 A NEW KIND OF URBAN SCHOOL

THE IDEA HIT ME in early 1998. I had survived my first two years in the trenches and was well into my third. No longer a rookie but far from a master teacher, I had at least gained some confidence in my ability to manage a classroom and educate kids. It still wasn't easy, but I was enjoying the challenge.

There was, however, a part of me that wanted to do something more in education—beyond my own classroom and my involvement in the Youth Service Alliance, the organization Mary and I had established. The most logical transition would have been into school administration, but I didn't want to leave the classroom.

I began to look at the public charter school movement, a new idea that was taking the country by storm. Heralding the concept as a promising alternative to traditional public schools, one state legislature after another was clearing the way for charters. In 1996, there were about 250 charters in ten states; one year later, there were over 400 in twenty-five states and the District of Columbia. Plenty more were in the planning stages. Charters had become a force to be reckoned with.

The history of the charter movement is spelled out on the US Charter Schools Web site. Ray Budde, an educator in New England, was reportedly the first to recommend in the 1970s that local school boards grant "charters" or contracts to groups of teachers to implement new techniques and ideas. A decade later, Philadelphia implemented a form of Budde's idea by creating schools-within-schools that were called charters. Then, in 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a charter law.[1]

All but ten states have since enacted charter school legislation. There are now almost four thousand charters in the United States serving more than one million children. Strong bipartisan support from both Republicans and Democrats has helped fuel their growth.

But the accelerating charter school bandwagon hid a paradox. I'm convinced that most people still don't fully understand what a charter school *is,* what it does and doesn't do. So what are these schools, and why have they become so popular?

I discovered that, first and foremost, charters are *public* schools. They receive per-pupil state funding, similar to district schools, and they are nonsectarian. They're also tuition free and have no academic admissions requirements. But unlike traditional public schools, charters are fairly autonomous. They operate with their own independent boards, and they're exempt from some of the restrictive statutes, rules, and regulations that govern district schools. For example, charters may be exempt from district textbook and curriculum requirements. They may also be exempt from local collective bargaining agreements.

Fascinated by this innovation in public education, I continued my research. I found out that charters create their own mission, and, in return for autonomy, they're held accountable for achieving that mission. In a city with multiple charter schools, each is likely to have a unique mission statement, vision, and culture. In Philadelphia, for example, the mission of Youthbuild Charter School is "to provide the highest level of opportunities for inner-city youth who have not been successful in traditional school settings." Another charter in the same city, called Nueva Esperanza Academy, "is dedicated to providing a quality education that prepares critically thinking, socially capable, spiritually sensitive, and culturally aware young adults who can use English, Spanish, and technology as tools for success in the 21st century."[2]

It was this notion of a self-governing, independent public school with a unique mission that drew me to the charter movement. But how does a trailblazing educator obtain permission to start one of these schools? I learned that there's a legal contract between the school's leader and an authorizer that describes the mission statement along

with the instructional program, assessment and accountability plans, budgeting and finances, facilities, governance, and much more. In Missouri, the school board in Kansas City or St. Louis can authorize a charter. So can a community college or a four-year college or university with an approved teacher education program. Then, on a going-forward basis, the charter school is accountable to and assessed by its authorizer.

As the US Charter Schools Web site explains, most charters are the product of efforts by parents, educators, or community leaders driven by a particular educational vision or a desire to serve a distinct population. And most are start-ups, although some are converted public or private schools.

Each of the forty states that allow charters has a law that governs these independent public schools. Addressed in the law are matters relating to the approval process, operations, funding, teachers, and students. For example, each state identifies entities that can authorize or sponsor the schools. And if approved by an authorizer, a charter is granted for a specified term, typically three to five years.

Even after learning that some charter schools had been forced to close before the end of their term, my enthusiasm didn't wane. These charters had failed to achieve their mission or to comply with the terms of their contract, so their authorizers either revoked or refused to renew it. Closing down bad charter schools, I decided, was the right thing to do. The successful ones, of course, have their contracts renewed.

As I reflected further on this groundbreaking movement, it sunk in why advocates of charters assert that they're more student centered and innovative than district schools. With more flexibility to design and implement new educational programs, they're havens for entrepreneurial educators and administrators who value independence. Because they often operate outside union contract regulations, charters can make changes quickly when something isn't working, such as a teacher who is underperforming. The flexibility to make immediate changes without the approval of a large bureaucracy, to innovate and to compete, impressed me as an additional underpinning of the charter concept.

As far as teacher salaries are concerned, I think it's fair to say that charters are generally competitive with district schools. However, the comparison can be difficult because, unlike districts, charters might not follow strict salary schedules. They are more likely to use performance pay or other nontraditional pay practices.[3] And they may not offer the same benefits as those provided by unionized schools.

As an economics major and a businessman, I understood the basic principles of free enterprise, a concept endorsed by economists since the country's founding. I also knew that open markets are the best way to support the well-being of consumers. In one of my economics classes, we were taught that Congress began passing and enforcing laws as far back as 1890 to preserve open markets and to make it difficult for businesses to reduce competition. But those laws didn't apply to public education. It wasn't until one hundred years later that states first began applying free-market principles to public schools.

Now, thanks to a more open market that has led to the creation of charters, many low-income parents have a choice of schools for their kids. Most middle- and high-income families, of course, have had a choice for many years—in the form of tuition-based private and parochial schools. Once my own parents could afford the cost of tuition, they gave my older brother, Bob, my two younger sisters, Mary Jo and Liz, and me the option of transferring from our public school to a private school. Although Liz was the only one who chose to make the switch, it seemed to me then as it does now that school choice is a very good thing, at least for consumers of education.

In markets where choice exists and where per-student funding follows the student, schools must effectively win over the customers, who are arguably the parents. Because price differentiation is impossible in public education (public schools are tuition free), the best way to win parents over is through product differentiation. And a successful product not only *attracts* customers but also *retains* them. Where charters have done both of these things well, enrollment in district schools has suffered, resulting in budget cuts and, unfortunately for the employees, reduced job security.

It made perfect sense to me that attracting and retaining customers, long basic tenets of business, should be tenets of public education as well. I read how some charter operators are effectively and creatively reaching out to and connecting with parents in the communities they serve. And I thought that these pacesetters must surely recognize that parental involvement is not only a key marketing tool but also a critical element of student achievement. Some charters actually require parents to sign a "contract" obligating them to share in the responsibility of student learning. Contracts might, for example, call for parents to perform volunteer activities monthly at school, to attend parent-teacher conferences, to make sure that their children come to school appropriately dressed and on time, or to provide a suitable place at home for children to do homework.

But all this assumes that charter schools understand what their customers want. Many of them obviously do. Research shows, for instance, that parents generally prefer small schools over larger ones, and that small schools are generally more successful.[4] Enrollment in the average charter has been about half that of a traditional public school.[5] And my own research suggested that many charter principals are intensely mindful that parents want—and have every right to expect—their kids, not school personnel, to be the top priority.

I was encouraged that the mere existence of charter schools could provide parents with a sense of empowerment they may not otherwise have. Knowing they can exercise an option to transfer their children to another tuition-free school, parents might be more inclined to request changes if, for example, they're dissatisfied with a teacher or an aspect of the curriculum. No business, including a charter school, whose viability depends on serving and satisfying the customer can afford to lose too many patrons to the competition.

The more homework I did, the more energized I became about the idea of starting a charter school. But my investigation also uncovered the fact that charter schools are no panacea. In reality, the movement has plenty of harsh critics. In his article "The Case Against Charter Schools" in *School Administrator,* Bruno Manno, a proponent of charters

and former U.S. assistant secretary of education policy and planning, responded to the ten most common complaints about charter schools. Briefly, here are the chief criticisms that Manno addressed:[6]

1. Charters take money and students from district schools, which hurts those students left behind and eats into district budgets.
2. They're too chancy and untested, which can affect children's lives.
3. Charters aren't really held accountable because very few are forced to close for academic failure.
4. They're trendy, but in actuality aren't so different from district schools.
5. By "skimming off" the best students, charters undercut the promise to educate all children.
6. They don't sufficiently support kids with disabilities.
7. Charters weaken the institution of public education and cause a renewal of segregation.
8. They attract for-profit operators, and making money undermines the goal of educating students.
9. By introducing choice and competition into the public education marketplace, charters will eventually open the door to voucher programs.
10. Because there aren't and never will be enough charters, they'll never truly reform public education.

In responding to these criticisms and claims, Manno offered the following arguments:[7]

1. Public funding is not meant to be an entitlement system for school districts; financial support should follow the student.
2. Charter schools are more innovative, and there's inherently more risk in anything that involves innovation. But despite the risks, the charter movement is flourishing, as evidenced by the waiting lists at many of these schools.
3. In some cases, accountability standards are not as strong as they should be. But the mere presence of school choice rewards successful schools and penalizes unsuccessful ones.

4. Some charter schools may in fact not be viewed as innovative; perhaps they have opted for old, proven methods over the latest craze. But in at least one sense, even these charters are innovative because they are autonomous of school districts.
5. Regarding the charge that charters "skim off" the best and brightest kids, the opposite is often the case; many charters attract troubled students who don't succeed at district schools. Also, statistics show that charters have a larger share of minorities and poor children than traditional public schools, but fewer special education students.
6. It's true that not all charters are well equipped to serve kids with special needs. But at least parents now have the opportunity to "shop" for the school that best meets their children's needs. And some parents find charters that are particularly well suited to deal with their kids' disabilities.
7. If a charter school is designed to serve the needs of a specific ethnic group, that shouldn't be viewed as divisive. Specialization can be advantageous in the education of students. Furthermore, charter schools cannot employ discriminatory admissions practices.
8. Sure, there are some charter school operators who are motivated to make money. But the bottom line is that no charter will survive if it's unsuccessful in meeting the needs of students.
9. There's a significant difference between vouchers and the charter concept: whereas charter schools are public schools, vouchers allow students to attend private and parochial schools.
10. Time will tell the degree to which charters represent a transformation of public education. In the meantime, the charter school movement can continue to be evaluated and compared to other types of reform.

Although Manno refuted the more common criticisms or tried to put them in proper perspective, some public school officials and teachers' unions remain unconvinced. As education policy analyst Joel Turtel sees it, many public school authorities dislike charters for a simple reason: they "like their monopoly power over our children's education."[8]

Unions may also be afraid of losing their influence. When the Michigan legislature was considering lifting the cap on the number of charter schools, the unions warned of awful outcomes, according to Matthew Brouillette, assistant director of education at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. "Allowing greater school choice—*from* unionized schools *to* those in which unions have been unable to gain a foothold—would hit MEA [the Michigan Education Association] and MFT [the Michigan Federation of Teachers] right where it hurts most: in their pocketbooks."[9]

When I began discussing this reform movement with others, I learned firsthand that the charter school debate is contentious. A retired board member of the suburban district where I had gone to school gave me an earful. A strong proponent of traditional public schools and their monopoly power, he made me feel like a traitor for even considering the idea of starting a charter.

Perhaps the debate would be less intense if the data were clearer about how well students are doing in charters compared with district schools. However, the research is anything but clear.

A review of the available research on charter school achievement was commissioned by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Thirty of the seventy studies that were reviewed offered snapshots of performance. Twelve of these snapshot studies showed charters doing less well than district schools. But the remaining eighteen studies showed equivalent, varied, or generally encouraging results for charters. The researchers simply concluded that "The results are mixed and of limited use."[10]

The forty remaining studies, which judged the difference in student achievement over a period of time, were somewhat more directional. Twenty-one of them found that the improvement in charter schools was greater than in district schools, ten found charters' progress greater in certain categories, five found generally equivalent results, and four found that charters underperformed compared to their district counterparts. In summarizing these studies, the researchers were a bit more optimistic: "The results, while far from conclusive, are encouraging."[11]

As the wide-ranging results seem to suggest, the simple truth is that there are both good and bad charters, just as there are good and bad restaurants. However, if market forces operate as they usually do and if sponsors hold their charters accountable as they are obligated to do, then the poor-performing charters should go out of business.

Businesses sometimes fail for reasons other than poor product or service quality. One of my favorite restaurants in Kansas City closed—not because the food wasn't good but because the chef-owner wasn't a good business manager. I suspect the same can be said of some charter failures; they may close due to weak management, not weak academic programs.

Charters may close for any number of reasons. I read that Adventure Academy in Arizona, for example, closed six weeks after the start of its first school year. There was a shortage of students at this avant-garde school where there were no student desks and the focus was on hands-on learning.[12] A Washington DC charter school that served kids in the juvenile justice system closed due to deficiencies related to its special education program and poor student attendance rates.[13] In my hometown of Kansas City, the school district took over Westport Academy, one of its charter schools, after an audit found several accounting problems.[14]

According to the Center for Education Reform, a Washington DC–based grassroots advocacy organization, 436 out of the roughly 4,000 charters have closed in the last sixteen years, mostly due to financial or management problems. The Center concluded, "This is a testament to the power of the idea, the demand, and the concept of quality control that is alive and well throughout the charter school arena."[15]

When the Missouri legislature began debating whether charters should be allowed in the state, I was much more focused on helping SFX form a partnership program with Rockhurst University, where I had earned my teaching certificate. Under the program, teacher education students at Rockhurst came to SFX for clinical experience. Because most of the

Rockhurst students were white and middle class, their experiences at SFX exposed them—perhaps for the first time—to an urban, African American school environment.

As successful as this partnership was, SFX continued to struggle financially. The problem, as I saw it, was a shortage of interested families that could afford the tuition. Looking ahead to the eventual passage of charter legislation, I was convinced that SFX's conversion to a charter school would solve this problem. The principal argument against conversion was that the school could no longer be faith based. But the student body was already largely non-Catholic, and I didn't believe that this was a serious issue—at least from the parents' or students' standpoints. A reconstituted SFX could of course continue to emphasize moral and character development, even though it couldn't offer religious classes.

Each stakeholder group would benefit from the conversion of SFX to a charter, I believed. For the parents, there would be an end to tuition payments. As a charter, the school would be eligible for state funding at a higher level per student than it received from private sources as a parochial institution. And, without any tuition, its enrollment would likely increase. Greater enrollment and larger per capita revenues would then permit the school to spend more on educational resources for the benefit of its students. Even the parish would gain from the receipt of income by leasing its facility to the charter operation. Overall, the advantages seemed to outweigh any disadvantages.

In my mind, the fundamental issue wasn't about which was the best course for SFX. Realistically, there wasn't a choice; maintaining the status quo wasn't a financially viable long-term strategy. More school competition—particularly in the form of tuition-free charters—would only exacerbate SFX's fiscal crisis.

After reading on the Internet about a Catholic school in another city that had faced a similar financial predicament and then successfully converted to a charter, I proposed the idea to the school and parish leadership. My argument was simple: if you can't beat them, join them. And I even offered to help plan and organize the conversion. Although

I felt that my proposition was seriously considered, it was ultimately rejected. I respected the resolve of the church leadership to maintain the school's Catholic identity and to attempt to survive amid the increased competition that charters were likely to bring. But my concern about the school's viability didn't dissipate. And my interest in the charter movement in Kansas City wasn't at all diminished.

Just as I began to think about other possibilities, I received a phone call from Barnett Helzberg Jr., my mother's first cousin. That phone call would take us on a yearlong journey, often exasperating but sometimes exhilarating, to create a new charter school in Kansas City.

Barnett was the third generation to run Helzberg Diamonds. Under his direction, the local firm had grown to become the third-largest jewelry retailer in the country, with 143 stores and annual sales of $280 million. He had recently sold his company. The story of the company's sale is one of serendipity that underscores Barnett's distinctive and delightful persona.

During a business trip to New York City, Barnett spotted Warren Buffett waiting for a green light on a street corner and struck up a conversation with him. During that chat, Barnett had the chutzpah to suggest that Buffett buy his company. According to Barnett, Buffett replied, "Send me the information. It will be confidential."

Barnett recalled what Buffett said after reviewing the information. "I can smell these things. This one smells good." And, in a nutshell, that's how Helzberg Diamonds became a part of Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway.

Maybe this account sounds improbable. Well, Barnett is improbable, too. I've never met a man like him.

Barnett lives life as an adventure—a God-given opportunity. "Think of the world as your garden of marvelous people and ideas with unlimited picking rights for you," he wrote in his book, *What I Learned Before I Sold to Warren Buffett.* "Enjoy the flowers!"[16] Although eminently successful in his family-owned business, he remains as unpretentious as your next-door neighbor. He prefers French's mustard above all others, and to ensure that he was never caught without it, he used to carry a squeeze bottle to lunches, to business meetings, and on airplane

flights. Once in midflight he squeezed too hard and sprayed a fellow passenger.

His business strategy—as indeed his life itself—is grounded in simple common sense. If you discover that you are riding a dead horse, he wrote, "the best strategy is to dismount." And "Just because your name is on the door of a corner office doesn't mean you have a corner on the truth."

Like Buffett himself, Barnett would prefer to dispense his wealth to worthy causes while he is still alive to enjoy the process. "Giving is joyful, and I have always looked at it as selfish rather than generous on my part because I enjoy it so much!" He insists, "I want to die penniless."

Barnett and his wife, Shirley, had been longtime civic and philanthropic leaders in Kansas City. The sale of the family business boosted their capacity and interest in strengthening their community. During a cruise with their two sons to celebrate Barnett's birthday, the Helzberg family decided to make education their top priority. So Barnett began his research.

Initially, he considered creating a private voucher program. Like charters, vouchers are principally about school choice. The idea is to give low-income families the opportunity to attend private elementary and secondary schools. Theoretically, the mere existence of a voucher program should encourage poor-performing public schools to improve in order to prevent their students from leaving.

Before private vouchers came into vogue, there was a movement to provide publicly funded vouchers or scholarships to low-income families. As far back as 1955, economist Milton Friedman promoted the idea. Then, President Reagan picked up the baton in the 1980s. However, like charters, the public voucher movement has been met with considerable opposition. Some believe that vouchers would weaken the public education system, and teachers' unions are concerned that vouchers would result in fewer public school jobs.[17] Another fear is that using public money to send children to parochial schools would be a violation of the separation of church and state.

The private voucher movement was started by a business executive in Indianapolis in 1991. Three years later, there were twelve voucher programs in the country. Barnett became familiar with an umbrella group for private voucher programs, called the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation of America, better known as CEO America. John Walton, a Wal-Mart scion, was a strong advocate of the private voucher movement.[18]

Barnett called me to discuss his voucher idea. After listening to him, I suggested that, assuming Missouri would soon pass enabling legislation, starting a charter school could achieve a better outcome with a much smaller investment.

"Tom, I'm sixty-four years old," he informed me during our first meeting. "I don't know if I'll be around thirty minutes or thirty years." As the Missouri legislature continued to debate whether to enact charter school legislation, Barnett would periodically update this observation, as if concerned that I might not have heard him the first time. But he never said it in a gloomy way; it is not in his nature to be gloomy. He would say it in an eager, impatient way. Barnett was looking for a new adventure. He was in a hurry to find a new way to make the world a better place.

He consulted with his friend Lynne Brown, a former teacher, and she too was interested in starting a school. Before long, Barnett, Shirley, Lynne, and I were pursuing the idea of launching our own charter school.

Help came from a fellow barbecue lover. Joe Nathan directs the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. I had met Joe, considered one of the nation's foremost charter school experts and author of *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education,* during one of his early visits to Kansas City.[19] After I heard that Joe was returning to town to speak about charter schools, I suggested to Barnett that he attend. Barnett was impressed with Joe and treated him to Kansas City barbecue after the lecture. Joe would later become a valuable adviser and consultant to us (and an undying fan of KC barbecue).

Because there were no charter schools in Kansas City at the time, Barnett, Lynne, and I visited some in Denver. Wanting to avoid the pitfalls that others had stumbled into before us, but not wanting to reinvent the wheel, we met with their founding principals to learn the ins and outs of starting charters. That trip marked the real start of our planning process.

In May 1998, Missouri became the thirty-third state to allow charters, but only in the two core districts of St. Louis and Kansas City. The law is a relatively good one, ranked fourteenth best in the country by the Center for Education Reform. Charter law rankings are based on various criteria, such as funding equity and fiscal autonomy. Hawaii's law, for example, gets a low score because charters get less funding than traditional public schools, and caps are placed on the number of start-up charters.

But reaction across Missouri to the new law was understandably mixed. Opponents claimed, among other things, that charters would drain funds from traditional public schools. The St. Louis School Board and the Missouri School Boards Association challenged the constitutionality of the charter school law, but the court upheld it. Qualified charters were allowed to open in the 1999–2000 academic year.

Wanting additional planning time, we decided not to open our new school in the initial year. Several other groups moved much more quickly; fifteen local charters were established.

In that first year, forty-five hundred students attended Kansas City's charter schools, cutting into the enrollment of the Kansas City, Missouri School District. Lance Lowenstein, a district school board member, was quoted in the *Kansas City Star*: "We have not inspired confidence in our patrons, our students, our parents. This is the wake-up call to everybody from the superintendent on down that times have changed."[20]

Another board member, Patricia Kurtz, was quoted in the same article. "The beauty of the charter schools is the simplicity of their organizational structure. You see a problem, you address it." She concluded, "We have no choice but to compete. They're here. They're a reality."

We decided to retain an experienced school administrator to help lay the groundwork for the new school. To spearhead that effort, we

approached Dr. Patricia Henley, a respected local educator. Pat had been the principal of a school that received the prestigious national Blue Ribbon Award, and she had also been a superintendent of a metro district. More recently, the governor had tapped her to direct the Missouri Center for Safe Schools, where she was when we contacted her.

Our first step was to involve the community in the planning process. Working with a volunteer group assembled by the 49/63 Neighborhood Coalition, we sought to create a shared vision. The community representatives knew exactly what they wanted. They were interested in a high school with high standards; they wanted a rigorous curriculum that would prepare their children for college. And they wanted an emphasis on career development, community service, and leadership.

Consistent with that input, we named the school University Academy. (The original name was actually University Leadership Academy, but it was later shortened.) Our mission was to prepare students to succeed in an institution of higher education and to participate as leaders in society. There was some concern that the name and mission implied an elitist school. But considering that our aim was to serve primarily lower-income, underserved, inner-city families, we regarded the perception as an elitist institution as a positive attribute: after all, why shouldn't disadvantaged families have access to an elitist school?

With Pat's help, I tried to articulate our vision in the form of a charter school application, which we were required to submit to an authorizing entity for approval. We decided to apply to the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). Its campus was in the same area where we hoped to establish our school. Having close ties with a university that had an urban focus and that prepared inner-city teachers could be mutually beneficial.

Organizers of charters that convert existing public or private schools have several distinct advantages that we didn't have—not the least of which was that they have a building from the get-go. This is significant because finding and financing a suitable facility is often the toughest hurdle facing organizers of new charters. As explained on the US Charter Schools Web site, the problem of securing financing is usually

compounded by the fact that most new charters don't have much in the way of a balance sheet or an income statement. To address this challenge, some start-ups seek out partnerships with other nonprofits, apply for grants, or engage in fundraising activities aimed at foundations and corporations.

Thanks to the Helzbergs' extraordinary generosity, we were fortunate not to have to worry about financing. The Helzbergs underwrote the costs associated with the launch of the school, which provided an incredible opportunity for the school to begin its journey on solid footing.

We were also quite fortunate that UMKC offered us a chance to locate our school in an underutilized facility that the university had leased for years. The old, one-story building once housed the engineering school but was now empty, except for an office that was occupied by the homeowners' association. Many years earlier, the same building had been a dairy. Ironically, it was the very place that my grandparents took my father and his brothers for ice cream back in the 1930s.

The greater irony was that our new school would be located just *three blocks* down the street from SFX, where I was still teaching. The close proximity between my old and new schools, which certainly was not premeditated, only accentuated my concern about SFX's ability to survive. After having previously alerted SFX's leadership that formidable competition from charters might well threaten its future, now I wondered whether *I* was about to contribute to its increased vulnerability. After giving a great deal of myself to SFX and caring deeply about its students, that was certainly not what I had intended.

It had previously never occurred to me that the two schools would compete against each other, regardless of their relative proximity to each other. SFX was an elementary and middle school, and our initial plan was to create a charter high school, consistent with the sentiment of the community task force. However, we finally chose instead to offer grades seven through nine, and then to add one higher grade per year over the subsequent three years. Thus by the fourth year, grades seven through twelve would be offered, essentially creating both a middle and high school. Our rationale to start with the middle grades was that

many of our incoming students would likely enter with significant academic deficits; the more time we had to work with our new students in developing the skills they needed to graduate, the higher our success rate would be.

The founders of our new school also recognized that our success rate would depend on the quality—not just the quantity—of time we had with our students. And a quality academic program can't be developed without a strong founding principal. A capable leader is imperative for any business. But in the case of a new school, strong leadership is especially critical because the school begins with no climate, no values, no curriculum, no faculty, and no expectations; the founding principal is charged with creating each of these things.

We initiated a search for a principal and interviewed several candidates. But none was more impressive than Pat, with whom we had already developed a solid working relationship. Although she had not applied for the job, we wanted her to lead the school. Pat accepted the challenge. And she even accepted having me, a school founder and board member, as a teacher in the school.

In Kansas City's increasingly competitive school environment, we knew that our school had to be different. And it had to be better. We identified in our charter application six characteristics that would separate University Academy from other district and charter schools:

1. An additional twenty days of instructional time, creating the sense of a year-round education.
2. Performance pay for staff, to be awarded when results are achieved.
3. Small student enrollment, creating a highly personalized, student-centered environment.
4. An extended school day to support students academically and the family as a whole.
5. Availability for qualified students to conveniently enroll in college courses during high school and earn college credit hours.
6. The advantages of attending a high school in close proximity to and affiliated with an urban university.

These six characteristics would be practically worthless without a strong cadre of qualified teachers. Like other charters, we had tremendous latitude in hiring, as long as we satisfied a provision in the Missouri law that required at least 80 percent of the full-time staff to be certified. Our goal as an urban college preparatory program was to employ teachers who were competent in their content areas, had demonstrated an ability to reach inner-city students effectively, and wanted to work with an underserved population. Unfortunately, there wasn't an abundance of available teachers who met these criteria. To help us attract quality talent, we chose to pay at the high end of the salary range.

In addition to trying to assemble a team of experienced teachers, we knew it was also important to try to involve parents—not just as consumers of the educational "product" but also as partners in the creation of that product. To that end, our charter application included a requirement that parents sign a contract of support and involvement. We believed that insisting on a formal, written agreement might help establish a consistent expectation between school and home that would contribute to student learning. And in the spirit of collaboration, Pat sought parent input in creating the terms of the contract.

The University Academy contract required parents to ensure that their children attend school regularly and to notify the school of any absences; maintain communication with their children's teachers and principal; encourage their children to complete their homework each night; volunteer a minimum of two times per year; attend parent-teacher conferences; encourage their children to comply with school regulations and policies; and support the dress code.

The contract also included a student component. Students committed to being regularly in attendance and on time; understanding that the school was a university preparatory academy and planning to attend an institution of higher education; completing their assignments with pride and on time; complying with school regulations and policies; and abiding by the dress code.

The staff, too, was a party to the contract. They committed to ensuring that the school was a safe and orderly place in which to learn and

to providing a student-centered, rigorous, and meaningful academic program of instruction.

In Missouri, parents who are interested in sending their children to a charter must submit an application to the school. If the number of applications exceeds the enrollment capacity, admissions are to be based on a lottery. Charters may, however, give preferential admittance to families who live in the neighborhood, to children who already have siblings in the school, and to children of employees of the school. But in no event can academic criteria or testing be used to determine whether to admit a student. In other words, unlike private schools, charters absolutely cannot pick the best and brightest students.

To fill the classrooms, it was important to get the word out about our new school. For starters, we put signage on our building and a banner near the street announcing that applications were now being accepted. In addition, Pat spoke to church groups in the inner city. Several of us handed out flyers outside grocery stores as well as door-to-door in the immediate neighborhood. And just in case we needed more marketing and advertising support to generate applications, we asked a public relations firm to develop a promotional campaign, which it did pro bono. Fortunately, we didn't really need the extra marketing help. There was fortuitous publicity in local newspapers, much of which highlighted the novelty of two former local CEOs founding an urban school.

I remember one of the interviews Barnett and I had with a newspaper reporter. She asked him why he was involved in such an ambitious undertaking. Barnett talked about the dire problems of urban education that the current generation must address, stating that, "My camp director taught me to leave my campsite better than I found it."

This statement from Barnett reminded me of the words of the American philosopher William James: "The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."[21]

Initially, applications arrived at a slow but steady pace. The numbers picked up notably as the new school year approached. Then, in the last couple of weeks before the opening bell, a flurry of applications arrived

at the school office. On the first day of school, not only were all of the desks filled, but there was actually a significant waiting list.

Enrollment was 218 in University Academy's first year. Almost all the students were African American, and nearly 77 percent qualified for the federal government's subsidized lunch program. The average class size was twenty.

It was all very satisfying. But there was certainly no assurance that University Academy would be successful in retaining its students or, more important, in educating them.

We alternated between rash optimism and nervous anxiety. Sometimes Barnett and I talked enthusiastically of having created "Pembroke Hill East," a public school version of Kansas City's elite private school, Pembroke Hill. But there were other times the two of us wondered whether we had created "Helzberg and Bloch's Folly."

We were about to find out.

CHAPTER

7

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

"GOOD MORNING! MY NAME is Mr. Bloch."

It was my first day of teaching at the school I had cofounded. It was August 2000, and it was the start of another public school experiment in Kansas City's core. I had taught urban minority kids for five years at a parochial school, with what I regarded as a good measure of success. But now I felt as if I were starting all over again.

In this new public school, we were attempting what some would consider the near-impossible: preparing inner-city kids for college.

University Academy had no classroom windows, no gym, no library. It had no history or culture of either success or failure. What it did have were high hopes and great expectations. None were higher than my own. I had helped design and launch this school, and I was president of its board of directors.

I watched with mingled pride and curiosity as one bus after another dropped off students. All wore brand-new school uniforms, and all were on their best behavior. Within a half hour the halls, initially jammed with kids scurrying to find their classes, had emptied and grown quiet.

So far, so good. I thought my first-period math class also went well. My students were intrigued by "The Magic Wheel," a math trick by which I can determine the day of the month that any person was born. "How do you do that, Mr. Bloch?" they asked excitedly. I joked that I was able to read their minds. Then I challenged them to try to figure out the answer on their own. I promised that even if they couldn't,

I would reveal the secret formula on the last day of the school year. I knew they wouldn't let me forget my promise.

I didn't know it then, but that first day would be about as good as it ever got that year. As the days and months went on, I came to realize how idealistic my expectations had been and how much I still had to learn about the culture of the inner city.

Perhaps I should have seen it coming when the first question these kids asked was why I had left my job as CEO. When I explained, most of them remained unimpressed. They thought I was a fool to give up that much money. Hardly any of them could imagine becoming a teacher themselves. More tellingly, hardly any could imagine why anyone would want to teach *them*.

Never again during that year would the halls and classrooms be as quiet and orderly as on that first day. And all too quickly, signs of trouble began to appear.

Right off the bat, some kids realized that this was an opportunity—not to put themselves on a path to college, but to run wild in a new school without security guards, metal detectors, or enough strictly enforced rules. A few students roamed the halls during classroom time, dodging any adult with authority. They escaped the classroom by asking for restroom passes or to go to the school nurse. It was not unusual for a student to ask to see the nurse multiple times a day. Once on their own with a pass in hand, some of them would just hang out, loitering in the halls or restrooms, waiting for others to join them.

Before long, the noise level and commotion in the crowded halls during passing periods between classes reached unacceptable levels. Kids would yell from one end of the hall to the other or chase after someone who had directed a put-down at them, bulldozing over anyone in their way. I think I have the loudest, most piercing four-finger whistle anywhere in the United States. Now I used it more than I ever had.

The whistle didn't seem to help much. Within weeks, the first hole had been smashed into our newly painted walls. Profanities were scrawled on desks, and restroom fixtures were intentionally damaged.

Soon my primary concern wasn't teaching in my classroom. What concerned me most was *control* in the school.

I had expected that working in an inner-city public school would be more challenging than the parochial urban school from which I came. But I felt as if I had entered another world and another culture.

For starters, I was surprised by the extent to which my African American students had internalized the values of the larger white culture. Light-skinned kids would almost flaunt it. To put a classmate down they would say, "You're *really* black." Black girls would go to great lengths to straighten their hair in elaborate fashions. It seemed a world removed from the "black is beautiful" sentiment of the 1960s and 1970s.

Casually, jokingly, black kids would call other black kids the N-word. No offense was taken so long as it was a black-to-black thing. But one day, a white student in my class used the same word. A black classmate, instantly enraged, went after him. I had to wedge myself between them to prevent a fight. I began to think it had been a good thing that all our teachers had been trained to avert fights.

Every day of every year at University Academy would bring its unique challenges. I remember Lamar. His mood was highly erratic, up one day and down the next. I didn't know what lay behind such behavior. Then his father was arrested—just inside the front door of the school. He had threatened a teacher. The police found drugs in his possession. Now I knew. Lamar eventually transferred to another school.

It always concerned me that drugs were part of many students' lives or those of immediate family members. Kendis was a really good kid, but at times seemed down. I learned from her grandmother, with whom she lived, that she never saw her white father, who lived in the same city. Her black mother was in and out of drug rehab.

There was Serena. One day she casually mentioned that her older brother had been shot over the weekend. She seemed detached, as if she were observing herself from high above. Her voice had no more

emotion than she would have displayed when describing how to factor 256 into prime numbers.

One day Latrell showed up in a terrible mood. Refusing to raise his head from his desk, he had nothing to say to me or even to his classmates. Then I learned why. He had just visited his father in prison. Having a relative in prison was not unusual for these kids. The students were always sharing photos. One boy proudly showed me a picture of himself and his dad. His dad was wearing a prison uniform.

Then came the day when I handed Evelyn a test—and she handed it right back. "I don't want to take the test," she insisted. I handed it to her again, urging her to reconsider her decision; she handed it back a second time. The same thing happened on a different day when I handed Asafa a test. He didn't seem worried when I told him he would get an F if he didn't at least try.

I spoke with Asafa's mother at a conference. "Oh, he's just like I was," the mother laughed when I told her. "I didn't like school either . . . or teachers." She wasn't angry. If anything, she was amused.

Melitta Cutright, author of *Growing Up Confident,* said that "Parent indifference often rates above low teacher salaries as a cause of dissatisfaction for our nation's teachers."[1] My conversation with Asafa's mother certainly left me feeling dissatisfied.

On a more minor scale were incidents I could never have anticipated.

One morning I got a frantic phone call from Bradford's mother. "Bradford and I had an argument this morning and he stole my Fig Newtons," the mother complained. "I want them back!" I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. Eventually I took the problem to the assistant principal. He also had heard from the mother. I was relieved when he told me that he would take the problem onto his shoulders.

Then there were the chronic problems of chewing gum, hot chips, and pickles. It was almost impossible to get my kids to stop chewing or eating these things at their desks or in the halls. Before leaving home in the morning, several of them would wrap pickles in tinfoil and put them in their backpacks. Sooner or later, though, pickle juice would be seeping through the backpack. There was a period when it became

almost routine for me to stop everything and demand, "All right, whose pickle is leaking on the floor?"

We had a fairly strict uniform policy at University Academy, much like that of Catholic schools. Not surprisingly, the kids hated to wear uniforms and looked for ways to rebel against the policy. One way, for boys, was to wear their shirts hanging outside their belts. Another was to wear their pants so low that they forever seemed about to lose them. I would tell the same kids to tuck in their shirts multiple times a day.

The kids found other ways to express their individuality and to buy into the material culture. One was through their shoes. They always wore the best—$100 Nikes seemed to be the norm, even for kids eligible for federally subsidized lunches.

Being the tightwad I was, I bought myself some no-name white sneakers from Payless Shoes. I think they cost under $15, and I wore them on Jeans Day. I thought they looked okay even though they lacked the famous Nike swoosh. You wouldn't believe how much grief I got from my students. I was the talk of the school.

A particular incident made me realize the magnitude of what I was up against. I had a student I'll call Jamal. He never turned in his homework—ever. Soon, I confronted him after class.

"Aren't you interested in going to college, Jamal?" I asked as we stood there. "Aren't you interested in a better future?"

"I have no future," he replied.

That was the crux of it: most of our kids lived in a day-to-day world. It seemed almost futile to ask them to envision a future five or ten years away. You could even argue that theirs was a realistic approach to life, considering that in the world in which they lived, many lives were cut tragically short.

LeRoy E. Hay, who was named the National Teacher of the Year over twenty years ago, offered a different analysis of the kind of attitude that Jamal expressed. "Kids today are oriented to immediacy," he said. "Theirs is a world of fast foods, fast music, fast cars, fast relationships and fast gratification. They are not buying our promise for tomorrow because they don't think we can deliver, and they are probably right."[2]

As I said before, charter schools are no panacea. We would prove that in our first year. But somehow, some way, University Academy was going to have to change this mind-set.

I recalled our euphoric moments when we, the founders of University Academy, had talked of creating a variation of the private and exclusive Pembroke Hill School, which my own children attended. Its tuition is as costly as a big state university, but its graduates almost universally go to college, many of them to the top schools in the nation. With Pembroke Hill in mind, we had carefully designed a college preparatory program with high standards and a rigorous curriculum. We thought we would attract from the outset many of the best and the brightest. We quickly learned otherwise.

Within the first month, we gave every student a standardized test, the Wide Range Achievement Test, otherwise known as the WRAT (pronounced "rat"). The results, for the most part, were not encouraging. The average math score for my two seventh-grade classes was 4.9. In other words, the average incoming seventh grader was barely prepared for the fifth grade. This was only the average; the lowest score was second grade.

At my old school, there were always a few incoming seventh graders who had yet to master basic multiplication and division, but I was unaccustomed to seeing this many students with such wide gaps between their grade level and their actual skill level. How could these bottom performers have been promoted to the fifth, then sixth and now seventh grades? The practice of social promotion was apparently alive and well in some Kansas City schools.

Working with large classes in which skill levels spanned five or so grades was a challenge not only for me but also for all University Academy teachers. How could we possibly maintain the high standards associated with a college prep program when most of the incoming students were so far behind? Were we prepared to retain all who failed to demonstrate grade-level proficiency? Selfishly, I began to wonder if my students at this new school would at least show significant academic gains in math, which was a personal source of pride at my old

school. (This fear was alleviated when, at the end of the school year, my students' standardized tests showed an average improvement of 1.7 grades in math. Many of them were still behind grade level, but the gap had certainly narrowed.)

If nothing else, we were disproving one common myth about charter schools: the belief that they "cream" the best students from traditional public schools. In fact, one could almost make an argument that the opposite is true. This is not to say that University Academy didn't attract some successful students in its first year. We most certainly did, but they were clearly the minority.

However, the problem went deeper than that. It seemed that most of our kids weren't thinking about college. And most, I surmised, didn't even *want* to go to college. Mark Van Doren, a professor of English at Columbia University, said, "Our best chance for happiness is education."[3] How I wished that all our students had believed this to be true.

I also began to wish that we hadn't started with a middle school. Even under the best of conditions, middle school is more challenging than either elementary or high school, as young adolescents deal with fluctuating hormones, increased peer pressure, and a growing sense of independence. But it was too late to start over. This wasn't a dress rehearsal. It was reality.

And I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that it felt like a crisis. Just weeks into the school year, our faculty and staff met to discuss actions to combat the academic and behavioral challenges we faced. We instituted an after-school tutoring program, available to every student every day and in every subject. We went out into the community and signed up volunteers. But we also cracked down.

No more passes to the restroom or to visit the nurse would be issued during class, except in emergency situations. The nurse would begin to record the frequency of visits by student. No more food in the classrooms or halls. No more untucked shirts or sagging pants. The assistant principal was put in charge of monitoring the halls and restrooms. If necessary, we would call in parents and even suspend a child from school. Some of our new rules worked well, but others did not.

I had to admit to mixed results as I tried new approaches to encourage my students to learn and want to succeed. Igor Stravinsky, the famous Russian composer, said, "I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge." This was a time of mistakes and false assumptions for me as well.

I made the mistake of bribing my students to do their daily homework by bringing snacks on Fridays, which was test day in my classes. A nearby grocery store was willing to give me, without charge, unsold goods each week. I picked up cakes, pies, cookies, and the like. It took me a while to figure out that my strategy wasn't working.

Those who earned the treats appreciated them, but would no doubt have done their homework anyway. Those who didn't complained that I was unfair, and dreamed up every possible reason why they deserved better. One boy actually refused to take a test unless I allowed him to receive a snack. I didn't budge—but neither did he. I had to admit defeat.

One day Juanita interrupted me to ask if she could see the nurse. I refused her, citing the rule that prohibited such visits unless they were absolutely necessary. The next day I got a courteous but concerned call from her mother. It turned out that Juanita had asthma and had felt an attack coming on. Although I didn't realize at the time what her problem was, I should have let her go.

What *did* work—for some students and parents, at least—was a shock tactic. Several weeks into the year, I handed out my first progress reports. Many of the grades were F's.

Some parents responded to my requests that we meet to discuss the situation. But even here, the results were mixed at best. The parents of kids with the worst grades were the least likely to respond. And when some parents did come in, I got an earful.

One mother insisted that I was the failure, not her son. She accused me of refusing to help the low achievers in my classes. I explained that her son refused my help when it was offered.

"I won't let you ruin my son's self-esteem!" she snapped. That's how our conference ended.

I could now relate to what Louis Johannot, headmaster of a Swiss school, stated over forty years ago: "The only reason I always try to meet and know the parents better is because it helps me to forgive their children."[4]

At least that parent was interested in her child's education, and, to say the least, she was responsive. There were in fact many like her, who truly wanted their children to succeed. Although most were supportive of their teachers, a few parents resisted all attempts to involve them. Telephone calls went unanswered—or elicited answers I had never expected.

"He's your problem at school; he's my problem at home," one father informed me. "I don't bother *you* about problems at home, so never call *me* again!"

Despite what sometimes seemed like insurmountable challenges, there were moments inside and outside my classroom that I wouldn't trade for anything else. Those satisfying moments made the problems all the more worth taking on. I like how Howard Nero, a fifth-grade teacher in New Haven, Connecticut, explained it: "Unfortunately, teaching is often times like golf," he said. "So many bad shots in-between the good. And those are the few shots that we need to remember."[5]

One of those good shots that I still remember was near the end of University Academy's first year, when Mary and I were recipients of a civic service award. We received the honor at a dinner in a hotel ballroom with hundreds of people in attendance. I was totally surprised when one of my students presented the award to us. He delivered the following poem, which he had written. I'll always treasure it:

Let me tell you about Mr. Bloch
His teaching is as solid as a rock.
I understand what he's talkin' about
Even though he rarely has to shout.
Mr. Bloch tells lots of really bad jokes,
But he doesn't tell them as good as some folks.

He really isn't trying to make us laugh,
He's trying to get us to learn about math.
We always seem to get what he says
Even though we get mixed up with more or less.
We've heard that he may have lots of money,
We might suggest that he hire a writer to make his jokes funny.
His students agree that he's done lots for K.C.
We think the best thing is the University Academy.
It wasn't enough that he serves on the board
He arrives early every day to teach math—Good Lord!
He does lots of stuff for our community
But that wasn't enough so he built University Academy.
So all of us students who are really bright
Can go to university and begin to take flight.
Our motto at U.A. is "Learning to Soar."
And Mr. Bloch just keeps going more and more.
We're the Gryphons—just watch us fly.
Mr. Bloch will push us beyond the sky.
Mr. Bloch, thank you for all that you've done
You've made learning math really fun.
And because you've made our future secure
Our lives are going to be a fantastic tour!
We know you couldn't have done it without your wife
We've heard that she's the star of your life.
She is your partner in all that you do
So we sure want to thank her, too.
Mr. and Mrs. Bloch, we congratulate you
And thank you both for all that you do.

Without you (and the Helzbergs, too) where would we be?

We're not sure, but it wouldn't be University Academy!

I must admit that this poem actually meant more to me than the award itself. And I'll never forget sitting at the dinner table listening to my former student read one stanza after another, and enjoying each rhyme.

Another day that I'll always remember was when a student was demonstrating on the blackboard how to solve a problem but was going too fast, resulting in careless computational mistakes. "Slow down, you're moving too fast," I told her. Instantly, I thought of the lyrics to that Paul Simon tune from the 1960s, "The 59th Street Bridge Song," which is perhaps better known as "Feelin' Groovy." To keep things on the light side, I sang the song as she finished the problem.

My students got a kick out of their math teacher singing—or, I should say, attempting to sing. It was a good thing my wife and sons weren't there to hear me, as they are quick to remind me that I can't carry a tune. But that song became a hallmark of my classes. Before long, whenever a student worked too quickly on a problem in front of the class, we would sing it in unison.

For Christmas, one of my students gave me a neat multicolored rubber wristband. It wasn't just any wristband: the word "Groovy" was engraved on it. His mom found it on eBay and bought one for him and also for me. It wasn't unusual for kids to stop me in the hall and ask, "Are you having a groovy day, Mr. Bloch?"

There were many days when I wasn't at all sure that I was. I was having some severe second thoughts. Would University Academy ever become what we had envisioned, a true college prep school? Would it provide inner-city kids with a ticket out? Or were we destined to become just another failed inner-city school?

A great deal was riding on the answers, not just in Kansas City but in the nation at large.

CHAPTER

8 MAKING THE GRADE

IF I HAD TO assign a grade to University Academy for its first year, I suppose it would be a C. We had set out to provide a superior education to at-risk kids, and in many instances we succeeded. We had some good teachers and a strong curriculum. As Principal Pat Henley says, "Our goal was to build a reputation that UA is a rigorous college preparatory school—not a diploma mill. We did that." And I would agree.

But there were times when I felt that we, the founders, had learned the biggest lessons, and some of them were painful.

Perhaps we were naive. We weren't prepared for so many students who entered significantly below grade-level proficiency. We didn't anticipate that our new school would be a magnet for so many kids who had already washed out of other schools, a magnet for so many parents who hoped against hope that we might succeed where others had so clearly failed. We called ourselves a university prep school. But there were days in that initial year when I thought we were more like an alternative school, a last resort for the failing and the already failed.

This miscalculation—assuming that our incoming students would be better qualified and better behaved than they turned out to be—would impact and complicate much of our day-to-day operations throughout the year. We made other mistakes as well. We made some outstanding hires, though not in every case. But after we realized that we had made a mistake, we encouraged the administration to correct it—without delay. We felt that it would be unfair to the kids to wait until the end of the school year to replace a bad teacher.

There was the time Pat discovered that a teacher was merely stacking student papers—and not grading them. On the report cards, he had made up grades at random. He was gone in no time.

At the other end of the spectrum, there was a teacher who set the highest of expectations for her students. And she never gave up on a single one. Every day, she stayed later after school than any other teacher to help kids who needed extra attention. She was always as enthusiastic as she was demanding. But what impressed me the most was how her students responded—they knew she cared about them.

We had our share of teachers who fell in between these two. One had superb content expertise and was well prepared for each class, but he lacked any enthusiasm. Another teacher seemed quick to give up on the underachievers.

A great many parents had put their faith in us that first year, and I know we had not met all of their expectations. But they persisted, hoping and trusting that the school would improve on its rough rookie season.

"There was no light at the end of the tunnel," recalls Elnora Woods. She had followed me from SFX with her granddaughter Jenell, a wonderful kid with a kind heart. Her comment reflects the extent to which student misbehavior and academic deficits challenged the faculty, staff, and indeed the school's ability to realize its mission in that first year.

"We didn't have law and order," recalls Rose Kershaw. She too followed me from SFX and took a big chance to enroll her only child, DeAndré, in our unproven school with its snobby name. "I've been out in the world, but I have never seen kids act like these kids acted." Insubordination, intimidation, and disruptions were so prevalent in the classrooms and hallways that it sometimes seemed impossible to enforce rules and instill a sense of self-discipline.

I had thought that I understood the pathology of inner-city culture. But I had underestimated its soul-deadening reality.

We had kids who went "home" to homeless shelters. We had a girl who informed us one morning that she had been raped and abused all the night before. A slightly built girl got up before dawn to catch

a city bus to school. One morning she was beaten up by a group of toughs. After that, Pat drove her to school every day.

Too often, teaching these kids was like trying to build a house without first building a foundation. We fought to stabilize our wavering experiment: implementing a stricter dress code, emphasizing character development, enforcing rules of conduct. But one thing we didn't do was to lower our academic standards. We had said that we were a college prep school, and we meant it. We simply didn't do social promotion.

And after that first year, against all odds, things began to get better.

How could this be? An important part of the answer lay in the school's leadership, specifically the tireless and unflagging efforts of our principal, Pat Henley. In all my years, I've never met anyone who worked harder or longer than Pat. As the founding principal, she was determined to make University Academy a success. The school and all its students were her family, and she wasn't about to let them down.

At least Pat was fortunate to work with a dedicated board. And this is where Barnett Helzberg, its first chairman, deserves a great deal of the credit. This former jeweler with a heart of gold had one priority—educating underserved kids. To that end, he made sure that the school would always be financially stable and that politics were kept out of the boardroom.

Politics can be a serious problem for urban school districts whose board members are elected by public vote. Whenever board discussions and decisions stray from the well-being of students, politics is often the culprit. It helped that our board, unlike other school boards in the area, has never been elected by popular vote. The most qualified candidates in the community are often not interested in running a political campaign for a board seat.

Another important part of the answer lay in the dedication and heroic efforts of volunteers like Rose and Elnora. The phrase "It takes a village to raise a child" has become shopworn by now, repeated so many times that it has lost its power to inspire and stimulate. But these two women infused that phrase with life and power. They and a handful of others like them demonstrated that, perhaps more than any other

single factor, the day-to-day commitment of parents and surrogate parents makes the difference between educational success and educational failure.

Elnora and Rose took not just their own children but the whole school under their wings. "I decided that if you were so committed, I wasn't going to let the school fail," Elnora told me years later.

So Elnora volunteered to sit at a desk near the front door, intercepting kids off the street who seemed to feel that they could walk in anytime. She and Rose lobbied Pat to tighten the school dress code. When the school opened, our policy had been that any kind of shirt or blouse was acceptable, just so long as it had a collar. These two women saw to it that we went to a more formal uniform.

One day a girl came to the principal's office to confess that she had no proper blouse. Elnora bought her one with money out of her own pocket. Then there was the day when an angry mother stormed into the school. Elnora took her into a locked room to talk—and wouldn't let her out until she calmed down.

I think Elnora sized me up as a well-meaning softie who needed all the help I could get. "These kids don't care about you patting them on the head," she says. "You have to show them that you can help them deal with the problems they have."

Teachers and administrators certainly can't do it all. "We need to have a school for parents," Rose Kershaw told me once. I think she is absolutely right, and it is tempting to speculate what might happen if a school for parents—night school, maybe—were somehow integrated into a school for kids. Although we were never able to go that far at University Academy, Rose brought us as close as it is humanly possible for one person to do.

I got to know Rose when DeAndré was a student of mine at SFX. She has one of the strongest work ethics I have ever encountered. Rose made the sacrifice to pay about $2,000 annually in tuition for her son to attend SFX. To make ends meet, she had to get a second job to supplement her base income as a dental hygienist.

"I'm not a taker," she says matter-of-factly.

Transferring eighth-grader DeAndré to tuition-free University Academy relieved some of the financial pressure, although that was not Rose's primary motivation. Rather, it was her determination that "DeAndré is going to make something of his life." If anything, Rose worked even harder after DeAndré switched schools. She made a personal commitment to spend time around University Academy "every single day." Some days she'd help out in the front office. Or she would patrol the hallways, stopping kids who wore their pants so low that little was left to the imagination.

It was Rose, Elnora, and a few others who, under Pat's direction, mobilized a Parents Advisory Council, a small but uncommonly committed group that met each month. They gave input on school rules. They organized a Teacher Appreciation Day. They scheduled meetings at which teachers educated parents about the curriculum. And they planned special events for kids and parents to create a sense of community and school spirit. Rose also encouraged the school to serve breakfast to kids who otherwise would have had none. And, most every night, she helped her son with his homework, sometimes until 11 P.M.

Still, DeAndré wasn't happy his first year at University Academy. Had Rose permitted him to transfer out, he would have been gone like a shot.

DeAndré was a compact and muscular kid and a real gentleman. But he was also a quiet person with an inclination toward becoming an artist. Rose learned that another boy was picking on him and trashing his artwork. One day there was an incident in art class where the other kid pulled his chair out from under him. DeAndré fought back—and he knocked the other guy down. This drew him a one-week suspension, but Rose's first question to him wasn't about the suspension. "Did you win?" she demanded. He certainly did, and it was a turning point. Other guys started calling him Muhammad Ali.

As a teacher who encountered parents quite unlike Rose, I wondered why she was so different, so involved, so committed. A self-sufficient, caring, and dependable woman, Rose grew up in a small town called Portageville in the boot heel of Missouri. One of eleven children, she

attended college for two years at Southeast Missouri State before moving to Kansas City.

"I don't like people to give me money because you expect them to keep doing it. And you never learn how to stand up on your own two feet," she told me once. "That's what I'm teaching DeAndré."

When he entered the tenth grade in University Academy's third year, DeAndré finally began to tolerate school, Rose told me later. In part that was because, as she said, "lots of the kids who were troublemakers left."

But even with fewer troublemakers, University Academy was still a challenge for DeAndré. Besides the occasional distraction from other kids, the school was academically demanding. It didn't help that his passion wasn't math or language arts; it was visual arts. However, to succeed in these core subjects, DeAndré had no choice but to put in long hours.

Although he gained a good deal of self-confidence in high school, there were still times when DeAndré wanted to quit. But his mom would remind him of his relatives who had been in jail. "Is this what you want to do with your life?" she would demand. He kept going.

DeAndré graduated from University Academy in 2005 with sixteen college credit hours. Like other juniors and seniors at the school, he had capitalized on the opportunity to take dual-credit courses at UMKC, Rockhurst University, or Penn Valley Community College.

Dual-credit courses allow students to receive both high school and college credit at the same time. This means that our students can actually complete a semester or more of college by the time they graduate from high school. There are other benefits, too. Students are given access to resources on the college campus, including the library, computer labs, and academic support services. And these courses taken on campus help students make the transition from high school to college much more easily. But perhaps the most valued benefit for our students is that University Academy picks up almost the entire tab for the college tuition.

Each graduate asks one teacher to speak about him or her at commencement. I was truly honored when DeAndré picked me to speak.

And I was bowled over when he gave *me* a graduation present. It was a wonderful framed portrait of me that he had created. (I thought it made me look a bit old—until I looked in the mirror.) In the three minutes that were allotted to me during commencement, I had trouble finishing my remarks. DeAndré wasn't my son, but I was mighty proud of him that day. I always wondered who and where his father was and how proud he would have been of his son.

DeAndré is now a junior at the Kansas City Art Institute. He has developed into a highly talented artist with a primary interest in animation. After completing college, he dreams of working for Pixar, the studio that produced *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo.*

One final story about DeAndré: during the Academy's first year, Pat asked the students to select a school mascot. A committee of volunteers was formed to research the project. They picked an animal with which I was totally unfamiliar—the gryphon. They explained to me that a gryphon is a mythical beast that has characteristics of both a lion and an eagle. It symbolizes that success in life requires a combination of intelligence and strength. DeAndré designed our gryphon, which I suspect will forever be proudly displayed throughout his former school.

It's people like Elnora and Jenell and DeAndré and Rose who really make a school. But in this day of standardized test scores and school accountability, I would be remiss if I didn't try to offer a more objective evaluation. Recognizing of course that a cofounder probably can't judge his own school objectively, I'll try my best to offer a balanced assessment.

There have been notable accomplishments and a few disappointments since our first year. Starting with the positives, we were able to expand our enrollment after our fifth year from roughly three hundred to one thousand students, making University Academy the largest charter school in the city.

It's also noteworthy that all but one of our high school graduates—since our very first graduating class in 2004—have attended college.

On the surface, this is a remarkable feat for an urban school. However, because we were determined to maintain high academic standards, it's also true that many students washed out of University Academy before they could graduate. Many students and parents were left with two disagreeable options: either repeat the same grade the following year or switch to another school. Unfortunately, many students gave up and left the school.

One *Kansas City Star* article gave an idea of the attrition problem in our early years. Examining a particular class of seniors, it found that seventy-three incoming freshmen dwindled to thirty-six sophomores, which shrank to seventeen juniors, and finally to only thirteen graduates.[1] But not all kids left for academic reasons. We didn't have any athletic facilities, which drove away some of the more serious athletes. An extended school year that ended in mid-July in that inaugural year was simply too long for others. And until more recently, when kids dropped out during midyear, we didn't fill the open slots after eighth grade.

Applying college prep standards to low-performing incoming students seemed at times like trying to mix oil and water. Even so, the school has had a substantial waiting list each year, which I view as a ringing endorsement from the community we serve. When Elnora worked in the front office, she maintained the waiting list. She recalled instances when parents who lived outside the boundary lines of the school district demanded that their child be allowed to attend.

"A lady came in and filled out an application," Elnora recalled. She told the woman, "I'm sorry I can't take it. You don't live in the district."

"Just give me another one. I'll change it," the woman replied, betraying a desperate willingness to do anything it took to get her child into our school. Of course, her child could not be admitted.

The school has received acclaim outside the city limits. The Center for Education Reform in Washington DC included University Academy in its list of the top one hundred charter schools in the United States. And the Academy became the first charter school in the state to receive a ten-year renewal.

One parent put the bottom line this way in a posting about University Academy on GreatSchools.net, a Web site where parents anywhere in the country can comment on their kid's school: "If your family is not ready to work hard, this is not the school for you."

Here's what another anonymous parent posted: "My child is a 6th grade student at University [Academy]. I would not recommend this school to any parent who has an average child because the volume of homework is overwhelming and the possibility of failing and being held back is ever-present."

Being held back and required to repeat a grade isn't the worst thing in the world, of course, and some parents are willing to accept that possibility. Rose Kershaw recounted the story of one mother who spoke about her son's failing grades. "I don't care if he's at University Academy for a hundred years," the mother said. "I'm not going to pull him out." Knowing there was no way to escape, it didn't take long before this kid was motivated to succeed.

There are plenty of wonderful examples of low-performing students who amazingly wiped out their deficits. In all likelihood, however, it wasn't only the students or their teachers who were responsible for the turnaround, but their parents, too. As one parent wrote on GreatSchools.net, "Even students who are high achievers find the curriculum a challenge. As a parent, I have had to re-learn subjects and read novels in order to help my students with assignments."

University Academy obviously wasn't the only college prep school in the country when it opened in 2000, nor was it the only school with high standards and expectations. Yet I doubt that there have ever been many, if any, college prep programs in which nearly a third of the incoming students didn't return after their school's first year.

Because University Academy couldn't legally impose academic admissions criteria to screen out poor-performing students (nor would we want to), we increasingly began to feel that the most effective way for the school to fight the attrition battle would be to start admitting kids at the elementary level, rather than for middle or high school. These younger

kids would then be prepared to meet our high academic standards when promoted to the upper grades. But because of space constraints, it would take us a few years before we could physically make this change.

In the interim, we implemented a number of initiatives. We switched from block scheduling of ninety-minute classes every other day to fifty-minute daily sessions. We initiated before- and after-school academics-related clubs, hired a dean of students, and established technology-based remedial labs.

To support the costs of the supplementary programs, we launched our first fundraiser in 2003. Mary agreed to chair the gala, and the community support exceeded our expectations. Over seven hundred guests attended the "Shades of Blue" dinner, and more than $275,000 was raised. Even the students helped with fundraising. They presented Mary with checks adding up to $2,000, which they raised from an art auction and bake sale.

Although low-performing incoming students generate low standardized test scores, there have been encouraging signs. Our scores, which have typically rated below state averages, have generally compared favorably to other inner-city public schools in the area. And the scores for our high school students, most of whom have persevered at University Academy for at least a couple of years, have shown significant improvement over the incoming middle school kids. In fact, our students' college entrance exam results have approached state averages, a statistic that is uncharacteristic of urban populations.

Charter schools in Kansas City have posted mixed test scores. One analysis conducted by the *Kansas City Star* showed that six charters scored higher than the district in communication arts at every grade that took the test. But eight scored lower than the district. Two other charters had mixed results. In math, five charters were better than the district, seven showed lower numbers, and five were mixed.[2] These data might suggest that the jury is still out on the charter school movement in Kansas City. But there is no question about the schools' popularity.

As charters attracted more students, my old school, SFX, was going in the opposite direction. In August 2003, the pastor announced that it

wouldn't be able to stay open. The school had reportedly amassed a $250,000 deficit, and enrollment had declined to only eighty-three students. Although I had long felt that the school would eventually be forced to close, I was still sorry when it actually happened. And its parents were surprised when they were told to find a new school for their children just two days before the start of the school year.

I think some of the parents of University Academy graduates have experienced a different kind of surprise: they've been amazed by the financial packages for college that their kids have received. Some have been offered full scholarships from the colleges, and others have accepted scholarships funded by the Kansas City philanthropic community. And I don't know of any graduates who have regrets; once they're in college, they report that the Academy prepared them to succeed in a postsecondary environment. In part that's because many of our high school juniors and seniors take the dual-credit college courses.

The *Kansas City Star* wrote about one of our student's college pursuits:

> No teenager *wants* to stay in high school longer than he or she has to.
>
> But if you could save thousands of dollars in college tuition, wouldn't you stick it out?
>
> Jade Hicks is.
>
> She could graduate now, after her junior year at University Academy, a Kansas City charter school. But she'll return next year to take more dual-credit classes.
>
> The academy pays most of her reduced tuition at Rockhurst University and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.
>
> If she attends her dream school—Northwestern University near Chicago—tuition will be close to $1,000 per credit hour. If she goes to the University of Missouri-Columbia, tuition is more than $200 per credit hour.
>
> "That'll really help my family financially to take them now instead of leaving for college early," said Hicks, 17.

> She's also glad she motivated herself by braving college-level Spanish, pre-calculus and physics. She reviews notes and does lots of practice problems for tests in which she can't look at her notes. And she's gotten help from a tutor.
>
> "I think I'll be a better student in college now," she said.
>
> "I'll be ahead of some of the other students, so I'll be able to help them."[3]

University Academy and other local charters have made quite an impact on public education in Kansas City. Approximately one in five students attending public schools within the boundaries of the Kansas City, Missouri School District is in a charter school. According to an Associated Press story, in the first five years of charter schools in the city, district budget officials estimated that the exodus of students cost the district over $200 million in lost state aid. And according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Kansas City is now ranked fourth in the nation in terms of charter school market share.[4]

Our school is never going to be for everyone. "Don't get me wrong, they have great courses and really do get you ready for college," one parent wrote about us on GreatSchools.net. "But it's the children that attend the school. Most of them are inner-city kids, who have no respect for anyone. I had to take my child out because I felt that the school allowed just anyone to attend."

As offensive as this comment may sound, the parent is exactly right about the school serving inner-city kids and allowing "just anyone" to attend. After all, University Academy is a public school that has no selective admissions criteria. Perhaps "just anyone" referred to a school population that is well over 90 percent African American and from low-income families. Maybe the parent who wrote that comment didn't fit this demographic profile.

But the following assessment also appeared on the same Web site: "This is one of the best schools in the country!"

"University Academy is the greatest gift this city has ever received," I heard another parent say. "These kids have been given the opportunity of a lifetime."

And an article about the school in the *Kansas City Star* ended this way: "Diamonds may last forever. But motivating the next generation of thinkers is simply priceless."[5]

Two years after DeAndré graduated from University Academy, Rose Kershaw still goes to the school to help out, though not as often as she did when her son was a student. In fact, after our recent visit at a neighborhood coffeehouse, she had planned to go there to prepare for Teacher Appreciation Day.

"I'll stay involved until they kick me out," Rose told me. After we said good-bye, I thought to myself that University Academy should declare a Rose Kershaw Appreciation Day. And an Elnora Woods Appreciation Day, too.

We desperately need more people like these two remarkable women. Yes, the first year was truly "scary," as Rose told me. "But then a miracle happened."

She's had a lot to do with that miracle.

CHAPTER

9 MOVING THE SCHOOL

"NO GOOD DEED GOES unpunished."

In Barnett Helzberg's inexhaustible store of adages and aphorisms, Jewish humor and Jewish wisdom, this is one of his most frequent observations. No good deed goes unpunished—there is risk even in trying to do the right thing.

In 2002, with Barnett leading the way, we set out to do a very good deed. We would build an incredible school to house our University Academy.

We hoped the school would be the finest, grandest school in the entire city. And today, we think it is.

We also suspected that our good deed might be punished. And it was.

As Barnett wryly sums up the whole saga now, "I wouldn't trade anything for the experience, but I'd never want to go through it again."

Expanding University Academy seemed the logical way to go. As satisfying as the Kansas City community response had been to charters in general and to University Academy in particular, we knew we had to take this big step in order to bring the school closer to our goal of creating a true college prep school. Our initial experience had taught us that it was often too late to start admitting kids at the seventh-grade level; by that point, too many of them lagged badly behind. We had to intervene early in their academic lives by admitting them at the kindergarten level.

In spring 2002, there appeared to be an opportunity to secure an outstanding site.

Temple B'nai Jehudah, Kansas City's oldest Jewish congregation, was preparing to move from Kansas City, Missouri, across the state line to the sprawling suburbs of Johnson County, Kansas. The move would reflect a similar migration of congregation membership that had taken place over the past quarter of a century.

Anticipating years ago the eventual relocation of the congregation, B'nai Jehudah had bought acreage in Johnson County. A religious school had already been built there, and it was simply a matter of time and money before a new sanctuary would be constructed to complete its relocation.

The temple had a long history of social activism. One of its rabbis, Samuel Mayerberg, who served the temple from 1928 until 1960, was nationally recognized in his fight against housing discrimination. A man of purposeful action, he once cautioned in *Time* magazine, "Many people mistake activity for usefulness."[1]

The Helzberg and Bloch families had long ties to the temple. The Helzbergs were members of the congregation and were married in its chapel. My grandfather had been president of the board.

In spring 2002, Barnett and Shirley's foundation offered to buy the temple as the site of a new University Academy. "I think we're doing God's work as much as you are," he told his fellow congregants. But the proposal, which included demolition of the temple itself, aroused passionate opposition.

As the *Kansas City Star* put it at the time,

> The sale of the Holmes [Road] facility would spell the end of one of Kansas City's most distinctive structures. Designed by Kansas City architect Clarence Kivett, whose firm designed Kansas City International Airport, the broadly spiraling temple is meant to evoke one of the oldest structural forms, the Bedouin tent. A laudatory article in the July 1969 issue of *Architectural Record* said the interior, "punctuated by an 83-foot-tall concrete center pole, provides a big, serenely uncluttered space permeated by soft blue light from

> the spiraling plastic skylight." But the building also has been prone to leaks and other problems in recent years, making costly repairs necessary.[2]

Interestingly, the board of the temple wasn't the obstacle to demolition of the sanctuary. In fact, board president Irv Robinson was on record as saying, "We're talking about taking our property and using it to help what is probably the biggest challenge in our cities, which is the education of kids. So this was a perfect combination."[3]

Barnett was excited by the possibilities. "This was a serendipitous example of the stars lining up," he later recalled. "We knew that if and when a new sanctuary was built, we'd want to back it, and we also knew we'd need a new school facility. Once we got on this idea, it was so nice for us because it's like shifting money from one favorite cause to another."[4]

However, a few historical preservationists—or, as Barnett called them, "hysterical" preservationists—had a different idea. They were apparently more concerned about saving a maintenance-deferred, potentially abandoned architectural landmark than allowing urban kids the opportunity to attend a quality new school. Some of them demanded that the existing sanctuary be incorporated into the school design. But doing so would have cost millions more and essentially killed the project.

And there were disgruntled neighbors who didn't like the proposal for a different reason. They opposed the added car and bus traffic that would result from transporting one thousand children daily, including high school students. As Barnett recalled, one neighbor opposed the school plan because it would surely interrupt her afternoon naps.

An editorial in the *Kansas City Star* came down in favor of the school. It concluded that "this is an instance where the need for decent schools in the city should outweigh neighborhood concerns. As City Council member Ed Ford reminded residents at a hearing last week, Kansas City has lost thousands of families over the last few decades, primarily because of poor schools. 'We have here what appears

to be a wonderful asset, a college prep,' Ford said. 'It would seem to be a wonderful asset in the neighborhood.' "[5]

The temple board approved the project after a meeting. The city council then approved the project, too, and a 172,000-square-foot, $40 million new school was built, thanks almost entirely to the tremendous generosity of the Helzberg family. The architects tried to find a way to incorporate the old sanctuary, but doing so wasn't practical. However, the new school does include a replica of sorts of the Mayerberg Chapel, which is used as a meeting room available not only to the school but also to the general community. And the congregation saved the original stained-glass windows.

The new University Academy, which opened its doors at the start of the 2005 academic year, is a beautiful, open building that contains six "houses," designed as smaller schools within the larger school. This design element was in response to rather convincing research showing that small schools are more successful than big schools. Without doubt, the school is one of the most significant individual private gifts in the city's history.

Kansas City Star columnist Steve Penn wrote enthusiastically about its features:

> I've seen colleges that don't have the technology that University Academy boasts.
>
> . . . They aren't your average classrooms. Each comes with audio enhancement. A device draped around the neck allows teachers to project their voice through ceiling speakers.
>
> Many classrooms are equipped to pull up the Internet or even a basketball court on a big screen. . . .
>
> . . . The school has a gym that can seat almost 2,000 and a smaller one for lower-school students.
>
> . . . Along with books, the media center features several rows of brand-new computers. And the room is huge. At 9,300 square feet, the media center is half as big as the entire building the school was once housed in at 5605 Troost Ave.[6]

Aside from the school's beauty and the quality of all the new equipment and facilities, the space afforded by the new school enabled University Academy to more than triple its enrollment while adding six new grades, starting with kindergarten. But a school of one thousand students isn't simply different in scale than a school of three hundred. It is different in kind, requiring a different kind of management.

Given our backgrounds, management should be one thing that Barnett and I know something about. Still, it wasn't easy—not for me, at any rate. To this day Barnett insists that he lost no sleep over the decisions we had to make. "I don't worry," he told me. "You do all the worrying for me." It would seem that this is my role in life: the worrier in chief. Well, somebody has to do it.

One way to look at starting something new, an all-too-human way, is to become preoccupied with questions so big and so sweeping that they are impossible to answer. This means focusing on all the things that could go wrong. In a macro sense, our school was a $40 million gamble. Urban education has been struggling for decades. It's like an old-line business that is losing market share. Viewing the situation in this light, one might wonder why anyone would go into the business at all.

"Who's got the chutzpah to open an urban school?" Barnett asks rhetorically. "That's insanity."

But as Barnett likes to emphasize, the wiser approach is to focus more narrowly on "the controllables." "You worry about the things you can do something about," he explains. "Build on your strengths. Bet on your winning horses."

And so our board began to assist management in picking its way through the controllables, in this case a whole bundle of management decisions that accompanied expansion of the school. For example, there were decisions relating to budgeting and finance. We expected revenues to increase significantly based on per-student public funding, the formula for which is not a controllable because the state can adjust the amount from one year to the next. We also expected expenses, and particularly personnel costs, to increase correspondingly. A growing student body required a larger workforce; human resource issues, including

choices relating to management structure and hirings, were among the most critical decisions we had to make.

Our first and most important new hire was a principal for the lower school. Cheri Shannon was selected to start University Academy's elementary school. She made that job look easier than I'm sure it actually was. But that shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone. Before joining our school, Cheri had already helped lead another successful charter school.

Her commitment to the charter school concept stemmed from her disillusioning earlier experience as deputy superintendent of the Kansas City, Missouri School District. Two months into that job, she notes wryly, "We became the first district in the state of Missouri to become unaccredited." The state revoked the accreditation in 2000 after the district failed to meet any of eleven state standards for such things as reading achievement, test scores, and graduation and dropout rates. The district has since regained provisional accreditation. But her experience there left Cheri firmly convinced that "charter schools are the answer to reform in a large [urban] school district."

Logistically, determining how to effectively combine and operate a lower, middle, and high school on a single campus and in a single building required careful planning. And of course we had to make sure that the curriculum in the new lower school would prepare our young students for college prep course work by the time they reached the upper grades. Cheri confidently and competently took on these responsibilities.

Expansion changed the culture of University Academy. "You're now drawing your students from maybe eighteen or twenty schools," Barnett notes. Those students would range all over the lot in terms of academic preparation, creating problems of classroom assimilation. And, of course, the students would now range in age from kindergartner to high school senior.

One of the first management decisions we faced, even before Cheri came on board, was whether to expand gradually or all at once.

Barnett and I initially leaned toward phasing in change by adding two new grades a year. This reflected Barnett's long-held management

philosophy: "Fail small, succeed big." In other words, take advantage of the learning curve; you will make mistakes early in the process, but they will be relatively small in their impact.

"There's an African proverb, 'Only a fool tests the depth of the water by jumping in with both feet,'" he says.

However, Pat Henley and our consultant Joe Nathan benefited from an educator's perspective. They felt that phasing in change would be like opening a new school every year. We finally decided, with Pat and Joe, that we could limit the duration of student, parent, and staff turmoil by making the change all at once. This, of course, made our selection of managers even more crucial.

Whole books have been written about the art and science of management. But to Barnett, drawing on his father's advice, it all boils down to a simple axiom: "Everything is people."

That is to say, Helzberg Diamonds was about more than diamonds. Ultimately, the company was defined by the people who made it work, who made both strategic and day-to-day decisions and whose level of service stamped each store with its welcoming atmosphere and reputation for integrity.

The same could be said about H&R Block. More than just processing data and churning out tax returns, it too is a people business. It's about the thousands of tax preparers who interact with our millions of clients and *are* H&R Block. My father used to say that the company's most valuable asset goes home at the end of each day.

Similarly, University Academy wasn't just about a fine and spacious building. It was also about people—the students and teachers, of course, and the managers who make long-term decisions as well as keep the school on an even keel from day to day.

A charter school is a business. Its mission isn't to make money, but if it consistently loses money, it may find itself shutting its doors. We encouraged management to control expenses wherever possible, as long as the quality of education wasn't compromised. When the cost of photocopies got out of hand, we imposed restrictions on the use of the copiers and made sure those limitations were enforced.

The new lower school launched without a major hitch. We were intent on filling all grades, although the plan was to attract a particularly large kindergarten class. Our hypothesis was that the earlier the kids started with us, the better chance there was that they would be prepared to rise to and succeed in the next grade. Not only did we meet our enrollment plan, but there was a significant waiting list in almost every grade. The combination of a strong reputation in the community for academic rigor and a beautiful building enhanced our ability to attract new students. In addition, the impressive facility and its state-of-the-art technology made it easier to attract an experienced and diverse staff committed to the school's mission.

Following the successful transition to the new location and our first year as a K–12 school, a new senior management team was put in place. Pat Henley retired, after starting and then leading University Academy for six years. Cheri Shannon was promoted to superintendent. And in her first year, she installed new principals to run the upper, middle, and lower schools.

I view the management changes as a natural development in the life of the school. Every business goes through a life cycle—there's start-up, followed by growth and then maturity. (Some businesses eventually face decline and termination, but we won't talk about those stages.) Pat led University Academy during its start-up and growth phases. Now Cheri, who opened the lower school under Pat, would lead the Academy into maturity.

Management is a never-ending process, of course, but most of our big decisions are behind us now. It won't be long before our young lower school students will be in middle school and then in high school—and they should be academically prepared to succeed when they get there. That's when University Academy will truly have an opportunity to become "Pembroke Hill East."

I hope and trust that I will be around to see how the school develops. In a sense, Barnett and Shirley have already ensured that they'll be there.

"Always take a corner lot," Barnett's father advised him. "You'll do more business." With that in mind, Barnett and Shirley have purchased a plot—a corner plot—in the old Jewish cemetery next door to the school.

"You're never going to get rid of me," he warns school administrators.

In the shorter term, Barnett insists, "I'm getting more out of this than anybody. I almost hate the term 'to give back.' It sounds too goody-goody. I'm selfish. I love to be with these kids. They're going to find a cure for the common cold, a cure for cancer, and a cell phone that works!"

No good deed goes unpunished. Yet sometimes a good deed can be its own reward.

CHAPTER

10 REAL HEROES

I STILL REMEMBER THE DAY that I completely lost my patience in the classroom. It was several years ago.

The math lesson I had planned for my seventh graders that day may have been about simple versus compound interest. I'm not sure. What I do remember clearly is that, as I was about to introduce the lesson, Sasha and Lonnie had something of greater interest on their minds. They chattered away about a fight rumored to take place after school.

Being a fairly inexperienced teacher, I simply demanded that they stop talking. However, not only did Sasha and Lonnie ignore my demand and others that followed, but more students began to weigh in on the much-anticipated fight. Once it became apparent that my battle for the students' attention was a lost cause, I lost my patience. The room seemed to vibrate when my earsplitting whistle was followed by two words at an equally piercing decibel level.

"STOP TALKING!"

Instantaneously, there was complete silence. The students were clearly as stunned by the tone and volume of my voice as I was. This was in fact the first time I had truly shouted at them. It later occurred to me that my outrage carried into the adjacent classroom and down the hallway. Now I was more upset with myself than with the two students who had disrupted the class. Although yelling did achieve the desired result in this particular instance, I soon realized that the more I raised my voice and threatened dire consequences, the less effective I became. And the less I enjoyed teaching.

I decided that I simply couldn't and wouldn't allow my classes to deteriorate into fifty-minute confrontations with my students. And I wondered for the umpteenth time—why is urban teaching so difficult? Why is it so different? And, most important, how do successful urban teachers cope? What teaching tactics work for them? How do they manage to keep going day after day, year after year?

"We go out with this dream that we're going to change the world," Tracie, a sixth-grade teacher at University Academy, told me. Her career in education began as a substitute teacher in an inner-city district; I can't imagine a more challenging job than that. "We're going to catch these kids and get them where they need to be," she continued. "That's our dream. That's our hope."

But how do veteran teachers keep that dream alive in the harsh and often depressing environment of today's urban school? Even as a part-time teacher, I've found the work to be astoundingly wearing and strenuous. There are days when I believe that an urban teacher must be either a saint or a glutton for punishment.

Kellie, another University Academy teacher, told me that in a previous teaching assignment, she was "assaulted five times . . . hit and punched." And this was as a third-grade teacher!

Tracie also told me, "I had a student in my third year of teaching write me a letter saying he wanted to kill me. It gets scary out there. That's the bottom line."

I wanted to further explore the questions of how teachers cope and—more important—how they succeed. So I convened a group of University Academy teachers and administrators over pizza one afternoon.

I began by asking whether these teachers believed that an autocratic or oppressive teaching style actually worked. I wasn't thinking about the day when I shouted at my students. Instead, I was thinking about a teacher down the hall from my classroom who routinely ridiculed and belittled his students. I remember him barking repeatedly, "If you paid attention, you might actually learn something!"

Tracie was quick to respond. "Stay away from confrontation as much as possible," she told me.

Equally adamant on this subject was David, an eighth-grade teacher with thirty-five years of teaching experience. "I can't stand the yelling and screaming at kids. It's not the way to treat anybody—adult or child. I won't draw battle lines."

On the basis of my own experience in the classroom, I would agree with David. But this philosophy works only if a teacher establishes a strong sense of authority—which I'm convinced *can* be accomplished without yelling, screaming, or drawing battle lines. Otherwise, there are sure to be big problems.

"Weakness is clearly a recipe for disaster," Tracie told the group. "They're always going to test you. Kids smell weakness like a dog smells fear. And once they smell it, they've got you."

I believe tough love is the recipe for success. It's natural to be tough when a student is defiant. But it may not be so natural to show compassion and understanding when a kid is deliberately noncompliant. Yet that's what may be needed to neutralize insubordination. When Jeron refused to raise his head from his desk during my math class, I felt thwarted when he snapped, "Don't tell me what to do." It only got worse when I continued, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade him to sit up and get on task. That's when he blurted out, "God, I *hate* you!"

I tried not to take remarks like Jeron's personally, although that wasn't easy for someone as thin-skinned as I am. And I didn't blow up and castigate him in front of the class, although that was my predisposition at the moment. But I also didn't tolerate his disrespect. Indeed, no educator should tolerate impudence, whether directed at the teacher or another student. Jeron and I met after class to discuss the incident. I made sure he understood the inappropriateness of his behavior, and he made sure I understood why he was so despondent. He eventually apologized, and I knew he meant it. This never happened again—at least with Jeron.

But tough love without genuine toughness can evolve into pity. And pity is a dangerous trap for an urban teacher, who is tempted to feel

sorry for the stereotypical poor, disadvantaged, inner-city kid who might be viewed as having no future.

"That's the worst thing you can do for a kid," Tracie agreed. "You set them up for failure."

At the inner-city school where Kellie taught previously, she said that pity was omnipresent, starting with the administration, which had an unspoken policy of social promotion. Regardless of the level of student performance, "They just passed them right on up," she said. Social promotion isn't kindness. It is a mistake. As motivational speaker and author Les Brown puts it, "No one rises to low expectations."

Pity in the classroom can create other problems, too. "It's easy to say, 'I'm going to change those poor kids,'" high school principal Clem observed. Born and raised in Nigeria, Clem is an experienced educator who speaks in a wonderful dialect. "If you come in with that mind-set, you're going to crash. Those kids know when you pity them, and that doesn't work. They're going to push you until they run you off. If you don't create a structure that takes care of the problem right away, you won't get to do [teach] anything."

Not everyone, including parents, understands the importance of structure. As Clem observed, "You actually have parents who call in and try to have their kids exempt from the structure. 'Why do they *have* to wear uniforms?' 'Why *can't* he wear earrings?'"

Questions like these may well indicate a lack of structure at home. Kellie explained why some of her first graders tend to lose control near the end of the school day. It's not because they're tired. "They get horrid because they don't want to go home. It's chaos there. Here, there's order and caring. Even though they push against it, they long for it."

In contrast, some students would like nothing better than to escape and go home. Darran, a middle school principal who had previously run an alternative high school, talked of how he gave one such student an in-school suspension—for this student, a harsher sentence than being sent home. Darran required the boy to sit in his office with him for an entire day, doing nothing but reflecting on his behavior and completing his schoolwork. "He was miserable," Darran said.

"Learning isn't one of those things for which people, even adults, want their money's worth," Clem asserted. "Some of these kids don't want to be here. You have to figure out a way to create a desire in them to want to learn."

Clem's comment supports the observation of British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell: "Children who are forced to eat acquire a loathing for food, and children who are forced to learn acquire a loathing for knowledge."

For educators to create an atmosphere for learning, maintaining structure throughout the school year is essential. Or as Karen, a kindergarten teacher who had previously taught in a suburban Catholic school, described it, "Always follow through with what you say you're going to do." I realize this may sound elementary; however, some teachers routinely threaten grim consequences but just as routinely fail to follow through on them. When this happens, any sense of authority is seriously compromised.

"My most misbehaved students are the ones who come up to me in the morning and give me a hug," Tracie explained. "They know I care. But they also know that I'm not going to bail them out." Tracie also emphasized laying out ground rules and enforcing those rules. "Let them know right off what you expect. And they have to know what you're not going to accept." Once again, it comes down to tough love.

"You have to stick to your guns," Karen stressed.

Sticking to your guns doesn't mean engaging in a debate with a student about whether a rule was broken. As John, an experienced urban high school teacher, pointed out, it must be understood that "you're not going to play the game of arguing with students. This isn't the only thing that will make you a good teacher. But without it, no matter how brilliant you are or how much you love kids, I don't think you're going to make it."

As a teacher, I've learned from a colleague's occasional missteps. One teacher I worked with had a nasty growl but absolutely no bite. He was plenty consistent, but it was the wrong kind of consistency; his students got away with everything.

"These kids are out of control; I can't take it anymore!" he finally vented in total frustration.

After less than a semester, the students had run him off. That was the end of his teaching career. It was unfortunate because, ironically, he cared deeply for the kids. And he had strong content knowledge. But his management skills were nonexistent. Instead of *teaching* kids, he was *battling* them for control of the classroom. He never won. Of course, neither did his students.

It occurred to me that his problem began on the very first day of school. That's when he had an opportunity to clearly spell out to his students his expectations and class rules, along with the nonnegotiable consequences that would result if the rules were broken.

For a relatively minor infraction, a teacher might first give a student a warning. A follow-up conference with the offender can also help nip the problem in the bud, but it shouldn't interfere with classroom instruction. Teachers need to exercise good judgment in determining whether to send a disobedient student out of the classroom; removing a kid certainly affects that child's ability to learn, but allowing a troublemaker to remain in the room while he or she continues to distract others is worse. An in-school conference with the parent and the principal is in order if a pattern of misbehavior emerges. For the more significant discipline issues, I think it's a good idea for teachers to keep a log and send a copy of it to the principal. Documentation may be especially useful if a student is to be suspended from school.

If the principal or another administrator is brought into a disciplinary matter, it's important for teachers to feel assured that management will support them. Confronting discipline issues with students and their parents can be stressful enough for teachers; having to worry about whether the administration will stand behind them adds an element of stress that is unhelpful.

As Jason, a sixth-grade teacher, said, "They [the students] have to know there's a line that they can't cross. If they cross that line, you have to be prepared to deal with it." Jason, who strikes me as a talented young teacher with a bright future ahead of him in education, hit the

nail on the head—this poor teacher I had described was unprepared to deal with it.

"What makes a good school good? How do you keep a good school from going bad?" Clem asked. Then he answered his own questions. "At the end of the day, you get back to structure." But Clem acknowledged that as critically important as structure is, it's not the only thing. A teacher must also have an unrelenting desire for his or her students to learn.

"To the degree we look at education as something we do together and look at everybody's child as if he or she were our own, we do it well," Clem said. "But to the degree that we start separating ourselves and saying, 'That's not my child,' the kids know that. I learned a long time ago that if kids think you care about them, it hurts them to not learn; they don't want to disappoint you. But if they think you're a jerk and you don't care about them, they'll give you the worst you can get."

As a kid, I gave my teachers my best because it was important to me to be successful. Nothing meant more to me then than earning high grades. In fact, my interest in learning was, regrettably, second to my interest in good grades. To be rewarded, I always did my homework and behaved in class. But this model is less effective in today's urban classrooms because it is so highly dependent on students valuing grades and respecting authority.

James Levin of Penn State's College of Education dismisses this model for another reason. He observed that such a system "is at odds with the basic premise of education, which is to teach young people how to be free and intelligent moral agents. The ideal is to teach students to adopt a behavior because it is the right thing to do, not because it will result in some Pavlovian reward."[1]

I've found that offering students choices is a highly effective technique to get them to do the right thing. If a student, for example, is disruptive during group work, he or she may be given a choice of getting on task or else sitting quietly and accepting a failing grade for the activity. And if a student continues to interrupt other group members even after having already been warned, he or she might be given a choice of

moving to a different seat away from the group or taking a trip to the school office. Besides its obvious value as a classroom management tool, giving kids choices also prepares them for the real world. Indeed, life is a series of choices. Karen explained that presenting choices even works with her kindergartners. "I give them specific boundaries. They have the ability to make choices within these boundaries."

"I'm so proud of my kids," Karen continued, "because if I'm pulled out of my classroom for a few minutes, I can trust them to behave. And I let them know how proud I am of their choices and how they can make those choices when there's not an adult in their presence."

Tracie, too, offers her students choices. And she links those choices with specific consequences. It's common for teachers to use a point system for homework assignments and tests. They may also give daily points based on class participation or citizenship, as Tracie and I have done. Students who act up in class, for instance, risk losing their daily points, which in the end affects their grade. "They don't want to lose those points," she explained.

But the rub comes when a student *doesn't* seem to care about losing his daily points or about his grade—or anything, for that matter. I asked Tracie how she deals with such a student.

She said she told one of her apathetic students, "You're going to care in about twenty years when you're working at a fast-food restaurant and I'm going through the drive-thru." She said she would ask him then, "Hey, don't I know you? You were my sixth-grade student. Is life treating you well?"

Tracie's story reminded me of the saying, "Shortchange your education now and you may be short of change the rest of your life."

My own experience suggests that the apathetic student, especially one who is defiant and disrespectful, is a teacher's greatest challenge. And that challenge is really twofold. The first test is to refuse giving up on the kid, which at times can seem like an intolerable proposition. And the second and far more difficult one is to find a way to help the student shed his or her apathy toward learning or life. To meet this thorny challenge, I've found that the keys are showing respect and having self-respect.

Bruce Perry, an authority on brain development and children in crisis, explained that "Self-respect is at the heart of respecting others. When you identify and appreciate your strengths and accept your vulnerabilities, it's easier to truly respect the value in others."[2]

How does a teacher *teach* respect? I know of only one way: it is to *show* respect.

As a beginning teacher, I tried just about everything I could imagine to influence my students' behavior so that they would be obedient. I sometimes employed what Kareen Smith of the University of Minnesota described as tangible reinforcers, which are things like candy or awards.[3] But, as I mentioned in Chapter Seven, I learned that bribes don't work well, especially over the long term.

Then I tried social reinforcers, which Smith defines as expressions of praise or approval for good behavior.[4] As painful and awkward as it sometimes was in the beginning, I went to great lengths to be positive, polite, and caring. What I tried to do was to model how I wanted my students to act toward each other and me. I showed them respect, and I constantly commended them for doing the same.

To Randi, who usually put forth minimal effort and was often inattentive in class, I said, "I like how determined you are to solve this problem."

To a struggling Dayton, who had consistently failed his tests until he finally got a D, I said, "Your last test showed improvement! Your determination is paying off."

And instead of yelling at students to stop talking as I had once done, I tried a totally different tack: "Kya, I would hate for you to miss out on this important lesson. You'll need this skill when you're out in the real world. So I sure hope you'll choose to refocus."

As author and educator Parker Palmer said, "Children may forget what you say, but they'll never forget how you make them feel."[5]

This strategy was so effective that before long I tried to set the tone for my classes even before the school bell would ring. Every day I greeted each student at my classroom door with a handshake or high five, and always with a smile. Besides the obvious benefits to the students

that resulted from a positive learning environment, I found that employing social reinforcers made teaching far more enjoyable and professionally rewarding.

However, teachers face a tougher challenge when social reinforcers are nonexistent at home. Then children become desperate for positive relationships. To varying degrees, a teacher can assume the meaningful role that many of these kids long for, to the point of almost serving as a temporary or substitute parent.

It was discouraging if not depressing when I encountered parents who were shamefully disengaged from their kids' education. Some of them were distracted by financial and family problems. Others continued to hold on to the same negative attitudes toward teachers and school that they had had when they themselves were students. Unsupportive parents can frustrate the education of their children and essentially thwart the good work of teachers who try to help kids view their future with hope.

Two psychology professors from Vanderbilt University tried some years ago to answer the question of why inner-city parents aren't more deeply involved in their children's education. Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler found that low-income parents don't see themselves as part of the school system. The parents essentially feel that teaching their children is the school's responsibility, not theirs. The professors concluded that schools that serve low-income, ethnically diverse families must make greater efforts to be more welcoming of parents.[6]

The University Academy educators with whom I met over pizza that day not only welcome parental involvement but also proactively seek it. Clem told us how he bluntly challenged a parent who hadn't taken responsibility for her child's education: "You don't really do what you're supposed to do," he told her. "You think somebody's going to fix your kid, and you don't have to do anything."

Some parents fail both to take responsibility for their kids' education and to expect their kids to be responsible themselves. "It's almost like they want an individual prescription for their kid," David observed.

" 'You make sure that my kid is taken care of, that my kid passes, that you give him a second chance. My kid has to succeed, whether he does his work or not.' "

One parent asked Tracie, "Is there a problem between you and my kid, because my kid isn't passing your class?" Tracie set the record straight, which at first further irritated the mother. "Ma'am, the problem isn't between your child and me. The problem is with his work."

I remember discussing with one of my professors at Rockhurst why so many urban students perform at a lower level. She offered an interesting hypothesis involving a comparison of two very different schools in Kansas City. One was the elite private school that my sons attended, and the other was an inner-city public high school with the lowest test scores in town.

"What do you think would happen," she asked, "if the student bodies at the two schools were switched but everything else remained the same?" She was certain that academic performance at the elite school would go downhill and the inner-city school would improve significantly. Her point was that there is a great deal more to educating children than superb faculty, top-notch administrators, and an abundance of educational resources. Socioeconomic factors, including parental involvement and home life, are critical influences on children's academic performance.

The more I listened to this group of teachers and administrators, the more I could sense a steadfast and unwavering commitment to their students, despite extraordinary impediments and barriers.

Kellie shared a story about one of her first graders who was having trouble controlling his behavior. "I think we need to go e-mail Dad," she told the boy. Kellie then composed on her computer a message that the child dictated. Moments later, the father replied by e-mail. "Son, let's get it together. You can do this. Ms. Baker cares about you. I care about you. Get it under control or there will be consequences when you get home."

Some days later, Kellie sent another e-mail to the father. She wrote, again using the boy's words, "I'm having a great day." There's an important

message here: it's as imperative for teachers to catch kids behaving well as it is to confront them when they misbehave.

All good teachers have at least one common ingredient: they share an intense interest in the subject they teach. As John pointed out, "You have to have a passion, not just for kids but for your discipline."

I've had the privilege of watching John perform in the classroom. When he teaches the French Revolution, it's obvious that he feels there isn't anything more important for him to teach and for his students to learn at that moment.

The challenges of urban teaching require a rare breed of teachers. They must be multitalented and multitasking. They must be professional managers and law enforcers. They must be surrogate parents, therapists, mediators, cheerleaders, caregivers, judges, and more. And, yes, they must be educators, too.

Not all succeed. Some are run off. Some burn out. "I pray every morning on the way to school," Kellie told me. "I ask God to help me be positive and not lose it."

Teaching is not just a job—it's a calling. And I have a word for those who manage not only to endure but actually to thrive in this environment.

That word is *hero*.

CHAPTER

11

A DUTY TO DREAM

ALGEBRA, UNLIKE LIFE, IS FAIR. In the typical algebra equation, both sides of the equals sign have the same value.

But life is unfair—even in America, even in a society dedicated to the ideals of equality and opportunity. Looking out at the kids in my classrooms—often the products of low-income, broken families, growing up in the spirit-crushing environment of the inner city—I have sometimes thought that what Americans expect of our public education is also unfair.

We expect this system somehow to overcome the structural inequalities of American society. We expect it to compensate for the widening gap between rich and poor. We expect it to serve as a surrogate parent for children who often have only one or even none. We expect it, against all odds, to be an engine that lifts the poor and the underprivileged into the middle class. At times this seems an almost impossible challenge.

But we must try to meet it. Indeed, as Americans we have no choice but to try.

America imposes a special burden on its citizens. We have not only the freedom to dream. We have a *duty* to dream, a duty to help make American ideals American realities.

Elaine Griffin, a former national Teacher of the Year, put it eloquently and succinctly: "Public education is the link between our nation and our dream of liberty and justice for all."[1]

This notion of a duty to strive for a more perfect world is deeply embedded in human history and the human spirit. I am thinking here of the Hebrew phrase, far more ancient than America, of *tikkun olam*. It means "repairing the world." One body of Jewish teaching holds that God created the world by fashioning vessels of light, but that these vessels shattered into pieces when God poured Divine Light into them. In this view, the world consists of broken shards, and humanity's task is to try as best we can to mend it.[2]

I do not think of myself as particularly religious in the conventional sense. But I do believe that I—that all of us—have a duty to "repair the world." This belief is, in large part, the reason I left my CEO position to teach inner-city children. I think it also is the reason why other teachers persist in teaching despite low pay and trying conditions. Theologian and philosopher Albert Schweitzer said it well: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know; the only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

As is evident within the four walls of my classroom, there are two distinct and unequal societies in the United States. I am a member of one of the societies, the "haves," and so many of my students are part of the other, the "have-nots." The widening gap between these two societies is one of our most critical national problems.

Sure, there have always been haves and have-nots. There has always been income inequality. But it's the unprecedented enormity of the gap now that is so worrisome—along with the fact that the gap continues to widen.

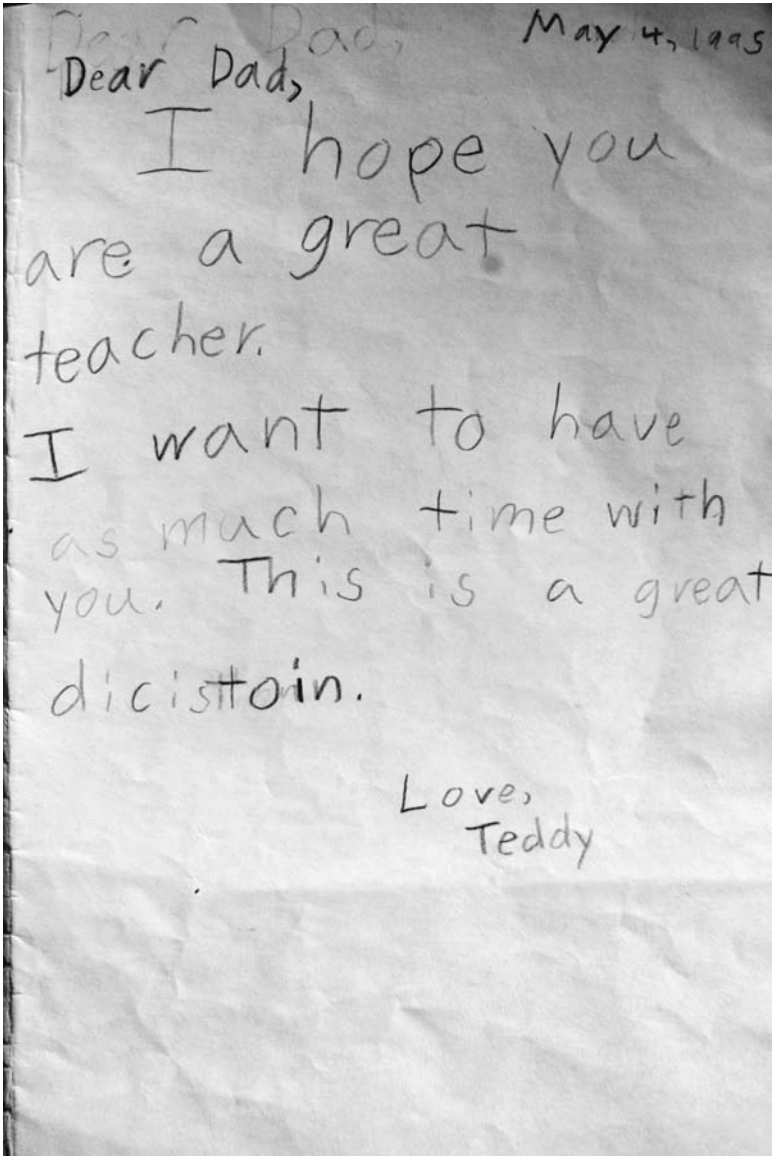
Data from the Internal Revenue Service indicate the size of this problem. The top *three hundred thousand* Americans collectively have almost as much income as the bottom *one hundred and fifty million*. Individuals in that top group earned 440 times as much as the average person in the bottom class. And this gap has nearly *doubled* since 1980.[3]

"We're becoming an oligarchic society, with an extreme concentration of wealth," concludes Edward Wolff, an economist at New York University. "This concentration of wealth is protected through a political

(l to r) Sons Teddy (age 4) and Jason (age 7) with Mary in 1991. I was 37 years old and had been President of H&R Block for two years when Mary began to worry about my health. "At the rate you're going, you'll be dead by 50," she said. *(with permission from the author)*

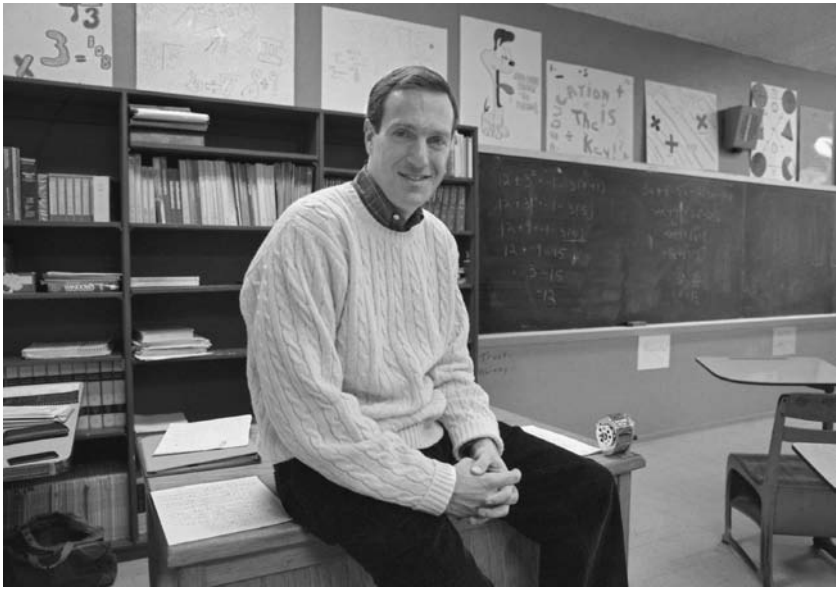
My father Henry Bloch was Chairman of the Board of H&R Block in 1994 when I was President and Chief Executive Officer. In a speech he gave a decade later, Dad spoke about my decision to leave the company: "He chose to be the best person he could imagine himself being. . . . Let us stand for the best, no matter what the cost." *(with permission from H&R Block)*

(l to r) Sons Jason (age 9) and Teddy (age 6) on a family vacation in 1994. That was the year I began to contemplate walking away from my job as CEO. *(with permission from the author)*



After Teddy (age 7) learned about my career change, I found this card on the breakfast table one morning. In 1995, he may have been more optimistic than I that my decision was a good one. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*

St. Francis Xavier School on Troost Avenue, where white Kansas City uneasily met black Kansas City. I felt fortunate in 1995 that there was an inner-city school willing to take a chance on someone who didn't have a teacher's certificate or any urban teaching experience. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*



The novelty of a CEO who traded status and power for teaching in front of a blackboard drew more national attention than I could ever have anticipated. This photo accompanied an article entitled "The Bloch who left Block" in the *New York Times* in 1997. *(with permission from Don Ipock)*

Joining me at the blackboard is Tina, one of my eighth-grade students in 1997. Like me, she is now a middle school math teacher in an urban school. "I have not forgotten the impact you have had on my life . . ." she wrote me nine years later before her college graduation. *(with permission from the Associated Press)*

My grandparents took my dad and his two brothers to the Country Club Dairy for ice cream on Sunday nights in the 1930s. Nearly 70 years later, the long shuttered dairy was converted into University Academy, the charter school I cofounded. *(with permission from Wilborn & Associates Photographers)*

Elnora Woods didn't just take her own grandchild under her wing at University Academy in 2000 — she took the whole school under her wing. Among her many volunteer activities at the school was sitting at a desk near the front door, intercepting kids off the street who seemed to feel that they could walk in anytime. "I decided that if you were so committed, I wasn't going to let the school fail," she told me years later. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*

After Rose Kershaw transferred her son DeAndré to University Academy, she made a personal commitment to spend time around the school "every single day." She helped mobilize a Parents Advisory Council, and she encouraged the school to serve breakfast to kids who otherwise would have none. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*

The new University Academy is a beautiful, open building that contains six "houses," designed as smaller schools within the larger school. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*

Superintendent Cheri Shannon (2nd from left), cofounder Lynne Brown (4th from left), myself (5th from left), Chairman Emeritus Barnett Helzberg (6th from left), Missouri Governor Matt Blunt (7th from left), Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes (8th from left), cofounder Shirley Helzberg (9th from left), Chairman Bush Helzberg (11th from left), and founding Principal Pat Henley (12th from left) at a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of University Academy's new building in 2005. *(with permission from University Academy)*

Barnett Helzberg led the way to build an incredible $40-million new school for 1,100 students. "Who's got the chutzpah to open an urban school?" he asks rhetorically. "That's insanity." But he's quick to add, "I'm getting more out of this than anybody. . . . I love to be with these kids. They're going to find a cure for the common cold, a cure for cancer and a cell phone that works." *(with permission from the Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program)*

Student DeAndré Kershaw designed University Academy's mascot, the gryphon, which appears on the wall of the school gym. The gryphon, a mythical beast with characteristics of both lion and eagle, symbolizes that success in life requires a combination of intelligence and strength. *(with permission from University Academy)*

The Institute for Urban Education (IUE) at the University of Missouri-Kansas City assumes that the potential teachers best suited to teaching inner-city kids may be former inner-city kids themselves. In return for free tuition, students pledge to teach at least four years after graduation in Kansas City–area urban districts. By the time they graduate, they'll have logged almost three times as many hours in the field as a student in a move traditional education school.

Jason (age 23) and Teddy (age 20) in 2007. Jason, a "chip off the old block," is now a district manager in training at H&R Block, and Teddy is a senior at Princeton University. Even more than my students, I see my two sons as my legacy and my future. *(with permission from Brian Bloch)*

process that's making it difficult for anyone but the monied class to have a voice."[4]

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis held that as wealth becomes more concentrated within a subset of the population, the strength of our democracy is jeopardized. "We can have a democratic society or we can have great concentrated wealth in the hands of a few," he said. "We cannot have both."

Even Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, has voiced his concern. He told a congressional hearing, "As I've often said, this is not the type of thing which a democratic society—a capitalist democratic society—can really accept without addressing."[5]

This predicament isn't unique to the United States. The world's richest 10 percent control about 85 percent of the earth's wealth, according to the United Nations University. And here's another disquieting statistic, which comes from the World Bank: 1.1 billion of the world's 6.5 billion people live on less than $1 per day.[6]

Raymond Baker of the Brookings Institution and Jennifer Nordin of the Center for International Policy have discussed the seriousness of this worldwide issue: "A billion people living in dire poverty alongside a billion in widening splendor on a planet growing ever smaller and more integrated is not a sustainable scenario. Whether it is the rich who must pause or the poor who must catch up is likely to be a defining issue in the future."[7]

So how do we address it?

From my experience at H&R Block, I know that the income tax system is one of the most effective and efficient ways to achieve social objectives. Ironically, many tax changes over the last decade have widened—rather than narrowed—the division between rich and poor. In 2001, for example, Congress and the president enacted tax cuts for all income earners. But the most generous cuts were reserved for the top income earners, especially the top 1 percent.

Some congressional leaders now aim to eliminate the inheritance tax. This would further exacerbate the problem. Helping the rich get richer by allowing them to pass their fortunes on to their children tax

free would benefit families like mine, but it's a dreadful idea for our nation.

Theodore Roosevelt sketched out a different kind of tax policy almost one hundred years ago. "I believe in a graduated income tax on big fortunes, and in another tax which is far more easily collected and far more effective—a graduated inheritance tax on big fortunes, properly safeguarded against evasion and increasing rapidly in amount with the size of the estate."[8] Roosevelt's position is every bit as valid today as it was a century ago. Although life isn't fair, our tax system should be.

As efficient as the income tax system is in achieving social objectives, it isn't the only tool available to the government. Hiking the minimum wage, raising the Earned Income Tax Credit, providing health insurance for the poor, increasing jobs training, and boosting child-care support are other examples.[9]

Some of these things may indeed be accomplished. But given the polarized state of our national politics, I am not optimistic about the possibility of fundamental tax reform.

This makes grassroots efforts by individuals and charities even more important. Although private initiatives alone can't solve the problem of economic inequality, they can certainly help. As William Sundstrom, professor of economics at Santa Clara University, said, "Individual and communal acts of charity will always play a role in reducing the adverse effects of income inequality, but significant reductions of inequality will depend upon the government's power to tax, transfer, and regulate."[10]

There are countless roles that individuals can play on a part- or full-time basis. Working to create greater educational equality is certainly one, and it's the role I've chosen for myself. Although the impact from such efforts has a far longer time horizon than the effects of instituting more progressive tax rates, closing the academic achievement gap will do more than anything to permanently cut the size of the income gap.

The challenges that I and every other urban teacher face are not new. Our nation's urban schools began to decline at the same time that inner cities themselves began to deteriorate. The 1950s marked the beginning of the massive movement to the suburbs that continues today. I'm just

old enough to remember the race riots and the white flight of the 1960s. One thing led to another. Property values fell as urban cores deteriorated; a weakening tax base led to urban schools that were underfunded as compared to their suburban counterparts. And an alarming achievement gap developed between races and income levels, the phenomenon that haunts us today.

Is the situation irreversible? Some think so. One of them is a friend who tells me that I am fighting a lost cause. "You're wasting your time," he once said to me.

He regards the achievement gap as a problem that's simply too large, too complex, and too expensive to be solved. And he implies that any efforts—including my own work in this area—will prove inconsequential. The realist in me understands his position. But I refuse to accept it.

My friend's position mirrors a statement I once read. "Our earth is degenerate in these latter days; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; and the end of the world is evidently approaching."

These words may sound as if they came from a frustrated teacher after a rough day in the classroom. (In fact, I have harbored such thoughts on multiple occasions.) But that's not the case. These words were reportedly written on an Assyrian clay tablet in 2800 B.C. I offer them now only to remind you and myself that over the millennia there have been similar tests of seemingly calamitous scale.

There's plenty of finger pointing when it comes to the problems that plague urban education. Schools and teachers aren't completely blameless, even though they are forced to accommodate cultural, language, social, and demographic differences while grappling with high dropout rates. Students are culpable, too, for not valuing education and for their involvement in gangs, drugs, and disruptive behavior. And parents are presumed guilty of not being good role models.

Even the once highly touted No Child Left Behind federal law that was passed in 2001 for the very purpose of improving school performance is now under attack. According to Monty Neill, executive director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, "NCLB is a time

bomb ticking at the center of the public education system. Unless we want to find ourselves standing amidst the rubble, we need to get to work." His criticisms of the law include "rigid, harmful, and ultimately unworkable" testing and inadequate funding.[11]

There isn't consistency from one state to another in setting proficiency standards under No Child Left Behind. An eighth-grade student in Wisconsin, for example, would pass the reading test at the 14th percentile, whereas his counterpart in South Carolina must score in the 71st percentile.[12]

There's also inconsistency across grade levels and subject areas. According to Chester Finn Jr., a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "Most [states] set up thousands of children for unexpected trouble in middle school by aiming low in primary school." He also notes that "States typically have far higher standards for math than for reading."[13] Although the idea may be politically divisive, I can't help but wonder whether national standards and tests wouldn't be better than the status quo.

So if the current No Child Left Behind law isn't the solution, how *can* we as a nation make sure that no child will be left behind? For an answer, I turned to Joe Nathan, a longtime consultant to University Academy and director of the Center for School Change at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota.

"Are we making progress in closing the achievement gap in the United States?" I asked. "Yes," Joe replied. "We're doing better, generally."

Doing better certainly doesn't mean that all urban schools are showing improvement. There are great, mediocre, and inadequate district and charter schools across the country, Joe explained. But there are enough examples of excellent inner-city public schools today that have a proven record of significantly closing the achievement gap. As a nation, we have begun to learn from their successes and can now replicate them.

Joe has studied some of the more successful urban schools in the United States, including three high schools in St. Paul, Minnesota, that have made significant academic gains and have increased graduation

rates. These schools did a number of things to change the plight of their students. For example, each of the large schools broke themselves into three to eight smaller schools. They assigned an adviser to provide personalized help to every student. In each school, all the teachers were retrained to provide better assistance to entering freshmen who had reading or math deficits. And to help the top-performing kids, the schools added Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes.[14]

Joe also believes that some long-term social trends are moving in an encouraging direction. "Families are getting smaller, and mothers are becoming more educated," he said. "And there's a greater awareness among families of the importance of education."

So the big picture may be at least moderately encouraging. But regardless of the big picture, I firmly believe that helping even one child redirect his or her life can produce an immeasurable effect. It is worth the effort.

I am thinking of Paul, who was one of my seventh-grade students when he transferred to University Academy. The second of five children in a single-parent household, Paul faced some tough challenges at school and at home. After falling behind in paying their gas bills, the family's service was finally cut off. A fire caused by a space heater in one of the bedrooms spread throughout the house. No one was hurt, but the family lost practically everything.

At least Paul had a passion that helped him cope—Kansas City Royals baseball. He somehow maintained a consistently high level of enthusiasm for the team despite its consistently disappointing record on the field. He tracked every hitter's batting average, and he relished each victory as if the team were contending for first place instead of trying to claw its way out of the cellar. I wondered what his life would have been like without baseball.

Just as the Royals struggled, Paul struggled at school, especially with reading. But he quickly discovered that he at least had a caring surrogate family at University Academy. This family included his teachers, of whom I was one, and the vice principal. He knew we wanted to help

him wipe out his academic deficit. He also knew that we couldn't do it without him. So Paul, unlike many of his peers, never gave up. I admired his determination.

I occasionally still see Paul, who is now a high school junior, in the hallway between classes. He always stops to greet me with a handshake and a smile. He has gained a considerable amount of self-confidence and is doing well in his classes. What hasn't changed is his loyalty to the Royals. The difference is that he's now doing much better at school than his team is doing on the baseball field. And he's excited about the prospect of attending college.

Last year, I received the following e-mail from one of his teachers:

> Just wanted to take a second to let you know what a big impression you have made on a student that I am teaching now. [Paul] . . . yesterday brought in a "personal yearbook" he had made to share with me. It is quite impressive. In it, he includes many important features of his life here, but it is clear from the book also how much you personally have meant to him while here and in what high regard he holds you. It is obvious, too, from the photo he shared with me, how much joy there must be in your classroom sometimes, which explains why he has been so happy there.
>
> He strikes me as a truly gifted young man, also very tender, who has needed, and may still need, encouragement. We will try to continue this good work you have done.
>
> Please forgive me for commenting, but just wanted to tell you this good thing as teaching can be a hard job sometimes, and it's easy in the flurry of it all to not notice when one has made a difference, and to notice only the moments when it wasn't quite right . . . but the truth is that you have really made a difference for this young man, and in case you hadn't known, just thought to tell you. It reminded and encouraged me to try harder myself. Thanks.

> Great job. You have really made a difference for [Paul] (and for many others, I imagine).
>
> It's as clear as a picture in a book.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened to Paul and others had they not attended University Academy. Perhaps they would have succeeded elsewhere. But for many of them, their previous records suggest otherwise.

Statistically, one success story like Paul's doesn't greatly affect the achievement gap in a single school, let alone in a city. But there are stories about kids like Paul that can be told every day throughout our nation's urban core. Individually and collectively, these stories are deeply gratifying.

As fulfilling as stories like Paul's are, they do nothing to remedy the problem that excellent teachers are not properly rewarded for the job they do. As someone once said, "A gifted teacher is as rare as a gifted doctor, and makes far less money."

John F. Kennedy put it in even stronger terms: "Modern cynics and skeptics . . . see no harm in paying those to whom they entrust the minds of their children a smaller wage than is paid to those to whom they entrust the care of their plumbing."

If not to that of a doctor or a plumber, then perhaps it's appropriate to peg a teacher's pay to that of a registered nurse. But even that's an unfair comparison. I learned that the average starting pay for a registered nurse is about 50 percent higher than that of the average teacher.[15] Don't misunderstand me; I don't discount the role of nurses in our society, as they require considerable training and play a vital role in health care delivery. But teachers also require training and also play an absolutely critical role.

Compared with practically any other professional, teachers in the United States are clearly undervalued and underappreciated. And

the ramifications are far reaching. For starters, low teacher pay contributes to high attrition. More than one-third of teachers who plan to leave the profession before retirement blame pay for their decision, according to the National Education Association.[16] And not enough talented young people are inclined to consider teaching as a career option. In the end, the quality of education is compromised, affecting our nation's children—and our nation's future.

Thankfully, there are many outstanding teachers who choose to teach when they could be earning substantially more in other fields. I admire these folks. They obviously care more about what they *do* with their lives than how much they *make* during their lives.

But we can't depend on filling enough classroom vacancies with able individuals willing to make a financial sacrifice. Kids deserve better. So do teachers.

Although higher teacher pay alone won't solve the problems of urban education, it will help. According to Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, "Teachers in middle-class areas will move to disadvantaged schools if salaries in poor neighborhoods rise above suburban rates. The differential has to be big enough to compensate for the greater skill and dedication required."[17]

Traditionally, teacher salaries have been based largely on education and experience levels. This is, in my opinion, inadequate and unjust. Experience and education are certainly important, but performance matters the most. According to Stanford University's Elliot Eisner, "We have inadvertently designed a system in which being good at what you do as a teacher is not formally rewarded, while being poor at what you do is seldom corrected nor penalized."[18]

In my view, Eisner's observation supports the case for performance pay in education. There are the cynics, of course. They argue that incentive compensation forces teachers to compete, and competition among teachers creates an unhealthy situation within a school. I disagree.

Consider how professional athletes are compensated. As much as I object to the obscene pay packages showered on pro athletes, I don't protest the practice of paying the most productive players on a team more than the least productive ones.

Performance compensation is commonplace in sports and in business, and it should be standard practice in the business of education. It motivates workers to accomplish specific goals, and it rewards top achievers. Why should public educators be exempt from the same opportunities that other professional managers are afforded? They shouldn't. And yes, teachers *are* professional managers—among other things.

They're also professional actors. As Gail Godwin wrote in *The Odd Woman,*"Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theatre."[19]

But an American classroom is one of the toughest theatrical venues anywhere. I doubt that many students would pay to attend a teacher's performance; in fact, some might pay handsomely not to attend. In the theatre, actors know that it's tough to interact with their audience; that's what teachers do constantly. They also perform without a script, and their daily performances generally run six, seven, or eight hours, not two or three. And whereas the top theatrical stars are paid significantly more than the average actor, classroom stars typically don't receive much, if any, extra compensation.

It's encouraging that some schools, including University Academy, are now experimenting with performance pay to reward their stars. A recent University of Florida study surveyed over five hundred schools to find out if there is any correlation between merit pay and student scores on standardized tests. The study found that in schools that paid incentives to teachers, students scored one to two percentage points better on the tests than in schools that didn't offer them. According to researcher David Figlio, "The schools that did enact teacher merit pay programs or other forms of performance based pay were doing better than the schools that were not. This is especially true in the case of schools that served low socio-economic status populations."[20]

Notwithstanding Figlio's findings, there are some who argue that teachers are already putting 110 percent effort into their work. I reject that theory, along with the presumption that money doesn't motivate teachers.

Another theory I can't fully support is that the longer people teach, the better they teach. I've worked with young, inexperienced teachers

who were not only more energetic but also more effective at reaching and teaching kids than older, more experienced teachers.

Sure, I made plenty of mistakes as a rookie. And I suspect that's the case with most first-year teachers. But I'd like to think that my enthusiasm compensated for many of those errors. I treasure a letter I received from one of my very first middle school students. He wrote to me when he was in high school: "I wanted to thank you for being such a great influence in my life. You helped to make me more prepared for life and high school. I still use the skills you taught me in 7–8 grade. . . . What made you such a great teacher was your willingness to share your excitement of math. When you got excited it got me excited, and wanting to learn. A lot of teachers lose that excitement to teach."

Many of the teachers at University Academy with whom I've worked over the years demonstrate that excitement; that's why they're there. I suspect they could work in a suburban school or in a different line of work, where the conditions are less challenging and the pay possibly higher. But they aren't driven to take a less challenging road or one that offers a bigger paycheck. They're looking for something else.

"You've got to be an idealist to be in teaching," one of my colleagues told me. "We're not going to change America, we're not going to make things better [unless we're willing to take on this challenge]."

John Goodlad, who has published more than thirty books and two hundred articles on education, must know what it's like in the trenches. In his book *A Place Called School,* he wrote, "Teaching is what teachers expect to do every day. To reach out positively and supportively to twenty-seven youngsters for five hours or so each day in an elementary school classroom is demanding and exhausting. To respond similarly to four to six successive classes of twenty-five or more students each at the secondary level may be impossible."[21]

A fellow University Academy teacher, whom I also regard as a fellow idealist, echoed a sentiment similar to Goodlad's: "You care about what you're doing. You care about the kids. And you care about them not just today, but for their future. You believe you can make a difference. And if you ever stop believing that, you ought to get out. Even though

all evidence tells you that you can't make a difference, you still believe it—against the odds."

Education is, at bottom, a human thing. So are dreams. We all have a duty to dream—and a duty to serve. *Tikkun olam:* repair the world.

The following three sentences are found at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. I think they're appropriate here—albeit in a different context. "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."

Teachers are people who have chosen not to be bystanders. They've chosen to help repair the world.

CHAPTER

12 THE NEXT URBAN TEACHER

HALF OF ALL NEW urban teachers are gone within *three* years, according to Edward McElroy, president of the American Federation of Teachers.[1] Neither the colleges that train urban teachers nor our nation's inner-city school districts can take pride in this statistic.

The terrifyingly high rate of turnover is due in large part to an insufficient number of teachers who are truly *prepared* to teach in inner-city schools. But, to be clear, the problem goes deeper than that. Not enough good teachers really *want* to teach in urban schools. Most teachers are white and middle class, and they are more comfortable teaching white, middle-class kids.

I certainly wanted to teach inner-city kids. I thought I was ready, too. But I soon learned the value of pre-service training specifically for new urban teachers.

I had wanted a challenge. Well, I got one, and it was at least as taxing (pardon the pun) as running H&R Block. If it is a challenge you want, try managing a seventh-grade inner-city classroom.

No one had taught me how to relate to a single parent who worked three jobs and was still unable to afford a car to get to parent-teacher conferences. No one had taught me what to do when the classroom conversation veered away from simplifying fractions to a drive-by shooting involving a student's older brother. No one had taught me how to help a seventh grader who was reading at a second-grade level. And no one had taught me how to teach math to a child who scarcely spoke any English.

Somebody ought to invent a school of education that prepares new teachers for these shocks! And, as I now know, someone has. It's the new Institute for Urban Education (IUE) at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), and I think it's a promising model for preparing urban teachers everywhere.

The IUE starts with two assumptions. First, urban teachers need a different kind of preparation than do teachers headed for suburban or rural schools. Second, it just may be that the potential teachers best suited to teaching inner-city kids are former inner-city kids themselves.

"They enter the program with cultural capital," explained Dr. Ed Underwood, executive director of the IUE. They've grown up on the mean streets of urban America; they've already seen it all. And, because they have cultural capital, they're far less prone to culture shock.

The IUE actively recruits such students as incoming UMKC freshmen. It offers them a good deal—and a hard bargain.

If accepted into the program, IUE students get free books and tuition for four years, plus free room and board in their freshman year. In return, they sign a seven-page legal contract. In it, they pledge that for at least four years after graduation, they will teach in Kansas City–area urban districts partnering with the program. (These districts are encouraged to recommend promising high school students as IUE candidates.) Students must maintain a 3.0 grade point average. And when they go outside the college classroom—for a field trip, for example—they are expected to be prompt, prepared, and appropriately dressed.

Finally, if they default on this agreement—by changing their major, dropping out of college, or failing to complete their four-year commitment to teaching in an urban school—their scholarship becomes a loan, and the IUE starts asking for its money back. The IUE isn't exactly a boot camp—but it is a no-nonsense operation.

The IUE began with the encouragement of the UMKC dean of education, Dr. Linda Edwards. Linda has been part of the education school for three decades, serving in a variety of capacities before becoming dean in 2003, and she brings a strong commitment to social change. As one colleague puts it, "Linda fights every day in the hope that someday all of our children will have the opportunity that comes from a good

education, regardless of their backgrounds."[2] I wish we could bottle and sell her passion and her drive.

The program started small in fall 2005, with a freshman class of eleven students. All but one had graduated from Kansas City's inner-city high schools, and almost all were African American. The plan is for enrollment to grow to at least thirty-five students for each incoming class. Once the freshman-to-senior pipeline is full, this would mean that there will be at least 140 IUE students in any given year.

The program is how I got to know Dr. Jennifer Waddell.

At first glance, Jennifer might seem an unlikely person to be associate director of the IUE. She grew up in white, middle-class Missoula, Montana, where she graduated from Hellgate High School (what a name for a high school!) and the University of Montana. But Jennifer is a westerner with a westerner's combination of idealism and down-to-earth practicality. In graduate school at UMKC, she used her PhD dissertation to examine, not the old question of why teachers burn out, but a more novel one: What makes them stay?

Jennifer is convinced that more would stay if college education programs generally did a better job of preparing students for what to expect in inner-city schools. "We train them in Utopia. Then we send them out into the real world," she says. As a result, the enthusiasm level of the typical teacher peaks very early, while he or she is still student teaching. Then, for many, it begins a steady decline.

After graduate school, Jennifer taught in public schools in Las Vegas and then in Kansas City's urban core. When the opportunity arose to help design the IUE from scratch, she jumped at the chance.

For Jennifer, the IUE is an integral part of a larger vision. "We're preparing teachers to change the world," she says. She adds that successful IUE applicants "don't bat an eye" when confronted with several rounds of screening interviews and, finally, that formidable seven-page contract. "They already have within them a commitment to urban education and to serve the community."

Unlike some more traditional education school programs, which postpone the bulk of a student's education courses until the junior and senior years, the IUE plunges right in during the freshman year. And its

freshmen don't just start by taking classes—they start immediately as assistants and observers in real inner-city classrooms. By the time they graduate, they'll have logged fourteen hundred hours in the field, almost three times as many as a graduate of a more traditional education school.

When I sat in on one of Jennifer's classes one day, I encountered a different kind of student, being taught in a different kind of way.

The class numbered fourteen that day—all freshmen, twelve women and two men. About two-thirds were African American or members of other minority groups. Most hailed from the urban core, but one young white woman came from a wealthy St. Louis suburb and was looking forward to a holiday trip to London. I have to admit that the first thing that struck my middle-aged eyes was that all seemed terribly young.

One of the two men sat wearing his baseball cap backward. A petite young woman who could have passed for sixteen turned out to be already a mother. Most were wearing jeans and sneakers, the uniform of choice for students today. But this impression gradually gave way to another: these were energetic, involved young people.

To keep them involved, Jennifer employed teaching strategies that the students themselves will be taught to use when they become teachers. The basic idea is to get away from the old-fashioned model in which the teacher simply stands there lecturing while the students simply sit there listening. Jennifer moved around the room as she spoke. And through a variety of ways, she immediately got her students interacting with each other.

She started the class with a little ritual called "checking in." To the accompaniment of giggles and some self-conscious embarrassment, they passed around a stuffed kangaroo—the kangaroo is UMKC's official mascot—and offered brief accounts of what they'd been doing since the last class meeting.

With the ice broken, Jennifer then asked them to divide up into teams of three. Each team was asked to collaborate in producing a multicolored poster summarizing something its members had learned in class thus far. After twenty minutes or so of animated collaboration, punctuated occasionally by a few more giggles, the posters were unveiled.

"All Urban Students Are Not Just Black Students," one read.

Another, introduced by the guy with the baseball cap on backward, read, "We've Learned That IUE Is All We've Got."

Still another: "IUE Is a Family That Will Help You Through Anything."

"Family" is a core concept of the IUE program. Students are assured that someone will always be there for them, not just while they are students but even after they become teachers. They are encouraged to bond. Thus Jennifer and Ed think of each class as a "cohort." "The students have become accountable not only to Jennifer and myself and their families, but to one another," Ed told me. "If one of them doesn't show up for class, you will see others pull out their cell phones to find out where they are."

Tiffany, a second-year student, has no doubt that they will keep right on calling each other after graduation. They all have each other's numbers on speed dial, she said, so whenever they want to discuss any problem with someone they know and trust, help is just a push-button away.

The bonding of Jennifer's class—the camaraderie and the mutual respect—was heartening to see. At the end of class, which was the last one before winter break, several students hugged each other. Some also hugged Jennifer. That's not something I had ever witnessed in any college courses I took.

This particular class met each Tuesday on campus. Then, on Thursdays, the students visited a school in one of the three partner districts. After some introductory comments from the school principal, they divided into small groups to observe a class, assist a teacher, or even present a lesson. Every four weeks, each rotated to a different school. Meanwhile, they kept journals, and every Sunday they electronically handed in "reflection papers" about their classroom observations and experiences.

One of the more obvious differences between the IUE and general education programs can be found in the course catalogue. Over two-thirds of the IUE course titles indicate a specific focus on urban education, and both the delivery and content of those courses are unique.

In the English composition course, for example, freshmen don't simply learn how to write better. They also learn—through their writing

assignments—about the history of public education in Kansas City. One of their papers might examine the role racial prejudice played in drawing local school district boundaries, or why the city continues to be so racially segregated. As Jennifer explained, because all the graduates will be working in one of Kansas City's urban schools, "It's important to know about the community in which you're teaching, including its history."

In the summer after their sophomore year, IUE students participate in an eight-week clinic with nonprofit agencies in the inner city. Participating organizations offer everything from counseling to health care. As they assist, students are further immersed in the communities in which they will eventually teach. They also learn about social service resources they can tap as teachers.

The program is an eye opener even for kids who grew up in the inner city, but especially for its relatively few students who grew up in suburbia. "I never knew how unfair the education system really is," said Michelle, who had attended a white, suburban high school. "Some of the schools don't even have the resources to buy textbooks, and the teachers have to spend their own money for basic supplies. My old school had technology you just don't see in an inner-city school. In education, things are unequal."

Tasha, who graduated from an inner-city high school, observed that she had been in more schools by the end of her freshman year in the IUE than some education students visit during their entire four years.

"We get to see what works and what doesn't work," she said. "Sometimes I will be in a classroom and tell myself, 'I will never do that as a teacher.' Other times, I can't stop writing in my journal, so I won't forget a great idea or something I saw that I want to make sure I do in *my* classroom."

I was curious to know how the IUE prepares future teachers to deal with a situation that has tested me as a middle school math teacher on many occasions: helping seventh-grade students who read at a much lower grade level. Jennifer referred to Yale professor Dr. James Comer, who observed that "No significant learning occurs without a significant

relationship." She offered me examples of relationship-building strategies that can be employed. One involves reaching beyond the teacher-to-student relationship to create a student-to-student connection, whereby one student tutors another. While helping another student improve his basic skills, the tutor gains mastery and simultaneously builds his or her own self-esteem.

"We tend to look at students who are struggling and ask ourselves, 'How can I help this child?'" Jennifer told me. "We should also ask, 'How can I use this child's strengths to help him help himself?'"

Teaching is a lonely profession. And, as Jennifer concluded in her dissertation, this loneliness—this feeling that they're all alone as they grapple with daily classroom frustrations—is a big reason why teachers burn out.

One teacher put it this way: "Imagine talking only to nine-year-old kids all day, every day. I mean, I love kids, but sometimes I absolutely need adult interaction."

Thus both Jennifer and Ed talk in terms of "support structures," and the IUE ensures that these structures will exist even after the students graduate. When they are placed in one of the three school districts, the newly graduated teachers will be paired for their first two years with mentors within their buildings. In addition, the IUE will host monthly sessions on campus so that its graduates can share problems they've encountered and solutions they've discovered. And IUE faculty will periodically observe the graduates in the classroom.

"You'll never get rid of us!" Ed tells students. It's not a threat—it's a promise.

The IUE emphasizes hands-on training. Its planners believe that future teachers need it as much as medical students do. Consider how intensely we prepare doctors. Med school involves comprehensive training, extensive work experience in hospitals, and, more than ever, specialization. Teacher training arguably requires a similar kind of rigor because it, too, deals directly with human life. But, unlike the profession of medicine, the profession of teaching suffers from a public misconception—that just about any reasonably intelligent person who

likes kids and wants to teach can be a successful teacher. In reality, teaching simply isn't that easy, and it isn't for everyone.

American society as a whole tends to hold this misconception, which is perhaps one reason why teachers' salaries are so low. Worse, many teachers and would-be teachers themselves likely have internalized it and think of themselves as occupying a second-tier profession.

The IUE makes a determined effort to dispel this kind of inferiority complex, as I learned one day as I sat in on another class, this one taught by Dr. Omiunota Ukpokodu, a native of Nigeria. She combined a warm smile with a brisk, all-business teaching style.

"It is all about respect," she told her class. "No effective learning takes place without respect. I want to respect you, and you should respect me. When you become teachers, respect is the first thing you want to establish." Respect, she said, is a teacher's birthright. Underscoring the point, she noted that when a teacher enters the classroom in Nigeria, pupils immediately stand and bow. Then she showed the students a scar on her calf. She got that scar as a Nigerian schoolgirl by dropping to her knees before a teacher—and cutting herself on a thorn.

"Become a social justice teacher," she urged her students. This directive reflected another core principle of the IUE program, which emphasizes that teachers can be—and should be—agents of personal and social transformation.

"What is teaching? Why do we teach?" she demanded. "If I am interviewing you for a teaching job and you tell me, 'I teach because I love kids,' I am not going to hire you. That's the reason everyone gives—they think it sounds so *cute.* But that is not a reason! The correct answer is, 'I teach because I want to bring out their intelligence.' "

She continued, "Anyone who has knowledge has power. If you don't *know,* other people are going to use their own power, which comes from knowledge, over you. You become like robots! Helping students become effective citizens—wow! That is so powerful!

"Students are going to be relying on you to model social justice. Sometimes students are going to tell you, 'That's not fair!' The way you answer them, the way you speak, is important."

Rather like a drill sergeant, Dr. Ukpokodu sternly tested the new recruits sitting before her.

"You've heard about urban schools," she began. "You came from urban schools. You know what happens there. Many students will be grade levels behind. Even third graders are taking guns to school. Third graders! I want to teach you how to be *resilient*. You must be *resilient* to succeed in an urban school!"

"Now," she challenged them after this recitation of urban school ills, "why do you still want to teach?"

The question hung in the air. Looking at the students' faces, so young and idealistic, I wondered how many of them would graduate from the IUE program, and how many would still want to teach in urban schools after their four-year commitment to the IUE is over.

It's surprising to me that there aren't more programs like the IUE at the undergraduate level in the United States. There are some schools that have an urban focus, but not necessarily to the same extent or depth as the IUE. The State University of New York Urban Teacher Education Center, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Indiana University Northwest all have education programs with an urban focus. And I hear that Center X at UCLA is considered an excellent model at the graduate level.

I hope—and we had all better hope—that more programs like the IUE will be developed and that they succeed. Urban education in the United States is under attack, and there are no quick fixes. But the IUE strategy can make a real difference. The obvious and inescapable truth is that the future of our urban schools—and indeed the health of every American inner city—depends on our next urban teachers.

CHAPTER

13 A CALLING

WHAT IS THE "GOOD LIFE"? Realistically, can our work be part of that good life, or is it simply something that gets in the way?

"Theories of the Good Life" was the only philosophy course I took in college. I selected it with modest expectations. It offered credits I needed, and I entered it with a senior's wisdom that, because there are no definitely right or wrong answers on the subject, it couldn't be too hard. I was mistaken on two counts: the class was harder than I expected, and it was the most rewarding one I ever took.

We live in a work-oriented, career-driven culture, and my own idea of the good life in those days reflected the dominant values of that culture. I had goals, both short term and long term. I wanted to work my way up the ladder at H&R Block and, ultimately, lead the company as CEO. After sixteen years, I achieved both objectives.

But it was just at that point—my goals realized, my future secure—that my work began to feel more like a burden than a joy. Maybe it was a midlife crisis; maybe it was something more than that. But I found myself, like so many other careerists, returning to the fundamental questions posed in my old college class. Was this all there was?

Shouldn't my life be something more than flying in economy class to far-off Holiday Inns?

I have since encountered many friends and coworkers asking themselves the same kind of questions. A veteran attorney I once knew had spent the better part of her adult life building a practice and attaining a relatively high standard of living. Yet she was miserable. She told

me she would gladly forfeit her salary to work for Legal Aid. The idea of helping people who can't afford to hire a lawyer appealed to her because it would be less stressful and more personally rewarding. But—and there is always a "but" in agonizing internal debates of this kind—how would she then pay for her son's college education?

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," wrote Henry David Thoreau. His solution was to retreat to a cabin on Walden Pond—to become a "self-appointed inspector of snow-storms and rain-storms." In *Walden* he throws down the gauntlet, coming close to suggesting that a good career may amount to nothing more in the end than the waste of a potentially good life.

"Simplify, simplify," he thundered. ". . . Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. . . . Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails."

Those words still thunder a century and a half later, most loudly for anyone who feels trapped in a dull or unrewarding job. But it is sometimes overlooked that Thoreau himself worked very hard. He didn't just inspect those snowstorms—that was the easy part. He kept detailed journals, not just of what he saw but, more important, of what he thought. Then, in what was a longer and still more difficult task, he painstakingly distilled those journals into *Walden,* the book for which he is best remembered. Thoreau went into the woods in 1845, but *Walden* wasn't published until nine years later. It was a long, hard slog.

So the solution to living the good life doesn't seem to lie in ceasing to work, even if that were possible. As the British poet William Cowper observed, "A life of ease is a difficult pursuit." Rather, the solution seems to lie in integrating our work with our deepest personal values and aspirations. Then our work, like Thoreau's writing, is hitched to a larger purpose. It becomes something more than work. It becomes a calling.

Wrestling with my own dilemma at H&R Block, I came across a book by Richard Leider and David Shapiro titled *Repacking Your Bags.*

The formula for the good life, the authors suggested, is "living in the place you belong, with the people you love, doing the right work, on purpose."[1] *Doing the right work, on purpose*—those six words enclose a great deal of wisdom.

More recently I learned from the work of Joel Garfinkle, the founder of Dream Job Coaching. He has helped thousands of people find the ideal job and says that it is common, somewhere around age forty or forty-five, for people to start reexamining who they are and what they really want out of life. To discover your true calling, he suggests that you start by reviewing your past experiences.[2]

"Look at those times that filled you with positive feelings," Garfinkle writes on his Web site, "when you felt that you were truly doing something you enjoyed, and that fulfilled you. Find ways to bring more of this into your life. What experiences have filled you with accomplishment and joy? What still brings a smile to your face? Bring it into your life now."[3]

Garfinkle offers a provocative way to look at life: "If you knew the exact date when your life would end, what would you do differently? More specifically, if you had only one year left and had to continue to work for a living, what would you change about your day-to-day life right now? Would you continue to work for your current employer or would you do something that satisfies your heart?"[4]

Clearly, many of us would like to change course if only we could. A survey by the Conference Board, a management advisory organization, concluded that "Americans are growing increasingly unhappy with their jobs. . . . The decline in job satisfaction is widespread among workers of all ages and across all income brackets." The report found that one of every two workers is unsatisfied with his or her job. Worse, the survey showed that "Two out of every three workers do not identify with or feel motivated to drive their employer's business goals and objectives." And to top things off, it concluded that one in four American workers admits to just "showing up to collect a paycheck."[5]

There's always an element of risk in following one's heart: it can be heartbreaking. I know a businesswoman who quit a successful and

lucrative career to work at an in-school reading lab, pursuing her dream of helping disadvantaged youth who were nonreaders or poor readers. She was disappointed that her efforts to help young people read weren't more fruitful, and she eventually left the school. She took a risk, and unfortunately it didn't work out for her.

But practically everything in life involves risk. And there's at least one risk that may result from *not* taking a chance. Years later, when you are reflecting on life's journey, you may experience a gnawing sense of regret for not having had the fortitude to follow your passion. Someone said, "One day your life will flash before your eyes. Make sure it's worth watching."

When I first contemplated making a career switch, I knew that my decision would be second-guessed, and not just by me. However, I was determined that second-guessing by others was at least one thing I wasn't going to worry about. Even so, I was surprised when an acquaintance actually congratulated me for finding my calling and having the courage to follow it. Until then, I had not thought about my career change as either courageous or as a calling.

The *Oxford Dictionary* offers two definitions for the word *calling*. The first is "a profession or occupation." The second is "an inwardly felt call or summons; a vocation." The latter description seems to fit for me. A calling must come from within. No one had urged me to or even suggested that I might become a teacher.

But this definition seems to be lacking in one respect. At some level, a calling must be about more than oneself. That's how it gives meaning to life. Certainly, teaching was very much about doing something that I thought I would enjoy. But it was more than just that; it was also about making a contribution to urban education. Specifically, it was about helping kids—disadvantaged, inner-city kids.

A calling can be a vocation as well as an avocation. After two years of being paid to teach, I chose not to be paid. (Those two years were also in effect unpaid, as I had contributed my earnings back to the school.) But even for those two years when teaching was my vocation, it was also my avocation. The poet Robert Frost spoke of combining the two into one when he wrote,

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.

I fully realize, of course, that not everyone finds their inner calling, and that many who do nevertheless are unable to follow it. Money is the biggest reason. I would be the first to acknowledge that my own financial security made it possible for me to trade a high-paying position for an essentially nonpaying one. If it had meant that my family would have to make a significant sacrifice, I honestly doubt I could have gone through with it.

We all know people who have gone through midcourse corrections in their careers—and thrived. I know a Harvard graduate who chose to quit practicing law to follow his calling—in residential landscaping. I also know a former CEO of a large regional bank whose real passion led him to the presidency of a public library system, where I understand he has done an outstanding job. These men might well say that they have found their dream jobs.

According to Garfinkle, your dream job (1) lets you be yourself; (2) embraces your own values; (3) integrates into your lifestyle; (4) permits you to use your distinct talents; (5) energizes you; (6) allows you to do what you like; (7) gives you an opportunity to make a difference in something you truly care about; (8) is fun and makes you happy; (9) allows you to do what you want, not what others think you ought to do; and (10) is fulfilling.[6]

What could be better!

So if you're among the 50 percent of Americans who find their jobs unsatisfying, shouldn't you at least examine the possibilities of a change for the better? Be careful. Think it through. Ask a spouse or a friend or a mentor to help you. In my own case, Mary was invaluable in helping me sort things out. In fact, she sometimes seemed to know me better than I knew myself.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the physician, poet, and author, once observed that "Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us." I think he was right. And Abraham Maslow, the American

psychologist famous for his theory of self-actualization, made the same point in another way: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What one can be, one must be."

So what, really, do you want to do with the rest of your life? Maybe, just maybe, you can do it.

CHAPTER

14 MIDTERM EXAM

TEMPUS FUGIT.

That was Grandpa Bloch's favorite expression. When he talked to me about how quickly "time flies," he was well into his eighties. I was just a kid then. Now, some forty years later, I understand all too well what he meant.

I remember my first day as a teacher as if it were yesterday. "Ten percent of your grade will be based on the final exam," I told my first class in 1995. Then, before I knew it, I was grading those final exams on the last day of school.

Now it's time to take my own exam. It will be the hardest exam of all—an examination of myself. My uncle Dick used to remind me, "Life is not a dress rehearsal." Even so, this midterm—and midlife—exam does amount to a dress rehearsal of sorts. It offers me a chance to evaluate the choices I've made thus far and, perhaps, to make midcourse corrections in the trajectory of my life. It is a chance to prepare for the end-of-life exam that faces us all—the exam that truly will be our final exam.

With Socrates, we can all agree that "The unexamined life is not worth living." But how should one's self-examination be structured? It is, after all, a unique kind of exam: written by the test taker, administered by the test taker, and ultimately assessed by the test taker.

And this exam is different in another fundamental way. As a teacher, I graded my students on specific concepts that applied universally to each of them. There may be different ways of solving a math problem, but ultimately there is only one correct solution. In life, there are not only

different ways to live but also different ways to succeed. With such varied backgrounds, methods, successes, and even failures, there couldn't possibly be one universal test.

Regardless of how each of us measures our own success, simply knowing that this exam would be required before life's end might influence how we live the rest of our years.

The questions on my midterm exam were inspired by Marion Wright Edelman's book *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours.* In it, she offers twenty-five lessons for life, which touchingly reinforce the notion that we should lead our lives by example.

Am I working for more than just money and power?

Yes, unequivocally.

Certainly I was tempted at times by money and power during my career at H&R Block. But I quickly learned that I didn't enjoy my job or myself when I began to focus on such things. The politician and environmentalist Stewart Udall made a perceptive observation: "We have, I fear, confused power with greatness." Absent a keen interest in money and power, I felt conflicted in the corporate world. At times I felt like a misfit.

Balancing the interests of the company's three main stakeholder groups—shareholders, customers, and employees—was a difficult challenge. In publicly held companies, shareholder interests are largely tied to short-term financial results. This places almost unrelenting pressure on senior management to deliver increased quarterly earnings and an ever-rising stock price. There was no avoiding that game as CEO.

The crux of the conflict for me was that I preferred to view the long-term customer, not the short-term-oriented shareholder, as the company's key stakeholder. I chose, for example, to keep our annual fee increases for tax return preparation reasonably low, even though the company may have made higher profits in the short term by raising

prices more. I suppose that if H&R Block had been family owned as opposed to publicly held, this conflict would not have gnawed at me to the extent that it did.

I don't wish to suggest that all CEOs have the kind of conflicts that I had, and I know that there are many CEOs who work for something more than money or power. Still, we live at a time when there is a growing appearance of greed in CEO compensation. Pay packages, which typically include stock grants and cash bonuses on top of hefty salaries, have reached absolutely absurd levels in many cases. In fact, the most recent data show that the average annual compensation for a CEO of a Standard & Poor's 500 company topped $15 million dollars.[1]

I'm grateful that my own financial situation has made it possible for me to teach without a salary; I can still afford a comfortable lifestyle. What I've learned, though, is that true happiness comes not from that which I possess or from my status in society. Benjamin Franklin explained it this way: "He that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money."

Whatever my other failings, I believe I've at least avoided this one. Instead of striving for money or power, I have tried to work for my family, my community, and my self-satisfaction—and hope to keep on doing so in the second semester of my life.

Have I taken good risks?

I would subdivide good risks into three categories: personal, professional, and social. I'll give examples of each.

I suppose the most common example of a personal risk in our society is the decision to marry. Given that about half of all marriages fail, wedlock must be viewed as a risk. Fortunately, this has proven to be a good risk for me.

Before Mary and I were married, she said, "I love you." A bit shyly and self-consciously, I responded, "Love ya, too." A few days later, she again said, "I love you." I responded the same way. Mary then looked me in the eye and implored, "Can you say, 'I love you'?"

I did, but it wasn't as easy as I thought. I had never said "I love you" to anyone before—ever.

Mary has helped me not only say the words but also live them. She somehow put up with my self-centeredness for many years. She has been exceedingly understanding and forgiving. She helped me become less selfish and more giving—a better human being.

Joining the family business and, in particular, succeeding my father were simultaneously personal and professional risks. My dad and uncle had worked incredibly hard to build H&R Block. Throughout my career at the company, I never forgot for a minute its enviable record of growth and the heritage it represented. As the second generation to lead the company, I took my responsibility very seriously, perhaps too seriously. I believe that, on balance, I was successful. The company continued to prosper during my tenure, but it's difficult to quantify how much any one individual contributed to its success.

I suppose that I took a professional risk by introducing to H&R Block customers in the late 1980s two pioneering and technologically innovative products, the filing of tax returns electronically and the refund anticipation loan. Offered by lenders and facilitated by tax preparation firms, these loans give a taxpayer what amounts to an instant advance against his or her expected refund. The tax return is filed electronically to the IRS, and the refund is then deposited directly into a bank account to repay the loan. Electronic filing and the refund anticipation loan have revolutionized the storefront tax preparation industry and transformed the competitive landscape.

Taxpayers who use the loan product clearly like the idea. Many of them are low-income taxpayers who may have little or no savings. However, some consumer advocates have criticized the cost of these short-term loans.

Former IRS commissioner Mark Everson explained the situation this way: "What you have is a real demand on the part of approximately 10 million people who, when they come in and file their tax returns, they want their money, and they want it right away. And if the IRS were to step in and say, 'You can't do it,' I think there would be an uproar on this."[2]

I view a social risk as a willingness to incur possible loss or harm for the benefit of the common good. The first significant social risk I took, of course, was to leave H&R Block and become a teacher in the inner city. It was a risk not only for me but also for the kids I was about to teach. I could have failed as a teacher, costing them a year of their schooling. Worse, I could have extinguished, at least temporarily, their desire to learn math. Weighed against this was the possibility that I could be a good teacher, enriching my students' lives and ultimately enriching society.

Helping start a new school for inner-city kids, the University Academy, was another social risk, and an even bigger one. A lot was, and is, riding on our experiment. Considering the crisis that exists in urban education throughout the country, as evidenced by the distressing achievement gap between minorities and whites, the school was a high-risk undertaking. Our University Academy could easily have been another in a series of failed education reform experiments in the inner city, reinforcing already existing doubts that a solution can be found. Fortunately, the school is now fairly well established and showing signs of success. But there will always be significant risk associated with this venture.

In addition to the social risk, there is an element of personal risk in the founding of the school. No one wants to be personally associated with a failed project. However, the potential public good that can result from a successful urban school in our community far outweighs the personal risk to my self-image if the school fails. For someone who in the past had tended to fear failure, this was a personal milestone.

Am I making a difference with those less fortunate?

Considering the many challenges facing urban public education, perhaps a better question is this: Am I *trying* to make a difference with those less fortunate? I've most definitely tried, but I often feel that I could do more.

The scope of my own work in public education pales in comparison to the massive effort and investment of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to reform high schools in the United States. Their aim is to establish what they call the "Three R's": rigorous course work, meaningful relationships, and relevant learning opportunities.[3] Some analysts, however, suggest that their transformation attempts are producing mixed results. But to my way of thinking, the couple deserves a tremendous amount of credit because they have willingly taken on a daunting challenge. Bill Gates not only declares that "America's high schools are obsolete" but is actually trying to do something about it—in a colossal way. His twenty-year goal is to boost the number of students who graduate from high school prepared for college from a third to 80 percent.[4]

Herbert Hoover said, "Words without actions are the assassins of idealism." Whether one tries to make a difference in a single school and in a single classroom, which is my objective, or across an entire nation, which is Gates's goal, this world needs more idealists who are also activists.

So how does a teacher know if he or she is making a difference? Just as the successful CEO can objectively measure the magnitude of his efforts based on his company's earnings and its stock price, the teacher can look to the standardized test scores of his students. However, the difference a teacher makes is far from limited to test results.

I can't possibly remember now how Alana, who was a student of mine over ten years ago, fared on the standardized math test she took in seventh grade. However, I vividly recall the note she gave to me at the end of the school year. Alana wrote, "I thank God for Mr. Bloch because without him I wouldn't be as smart as I am in Math. Thank you, Mr. Bloch, for being our teacher." Test scores are important, but words like these are priceless.

I feel the same way about Rick, another one of my former students. After he received a prestigious academic honor years after he was in my class, Rick's parents wrote to the school's board chairman: "This recognition now gives us an opportunity to acknowledge the skillful teaching of [Rick's] 7th grade pre-algebra teacher, Mr. Thomas Bloch.

Mr. Bloch is directly responsible for [Rick's] improvement in math and his present success. . . . In [Rick's] words, 'Mr. Bloch explained math in a way that made sense to me. He answered all questions the students asked him without making anyone feel stupid. He's a good teacher.'" To me, positive feedback from students and parents has the kind of intrinsic value that in-the-money stock options had when I was CEO; they are two different forms of windfalls.

But, of course, there are the failures, and I've had plenty of them over the years. There was Melody, and others like her, who tried hard but failed to grasp the material. Sadly, she performed miserably on standardized tests. Then there was Chartisha, who desperately wanted to transfer out of my class because the workload was too heavy—and she succeeded in doing so. There was Jerald, who didn't do his homework and sometimes refused to take tests. He failed my class and eventually transferred to another school.

But did I fail to make a difference when Chase flunked my class? Initially, I thought that I had. But he repeated my class the next year with a very different attitude and succeeded the second time. I felt that I had succeeded, too.

I want to circle back to the wonderful and powerful concept in Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam,* repairing the world. If we work at repairing the world, we are repairing ourselves. Contributing to society is an obligation that each and every one of us has. By doing our part to perfect the world in which we live, we are also perfecting ourselves.

I believe that Winston Churchill, who of course wasn't Jewish, spoke of the same concept when he said, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."

Am I a good husband, parent, and son?

I believe so, but there is much room for improvement.

I care about my family more than anything else—but I didn't always show my caring as much as I wish I had. I tended to be too self-absorbed when I should have been more attentive to them.

"It's not about you," Mary reminded me frequently. But it has been about me for much of my life. Even this book is about me!

I had trouble expressing the love that I felt, as Mary so correctly perceived before we were married. But my difficulty goes back a good deal further than that.

As a kid, I loved and respected Grandma Helzberg, my mom's mother. She was the most interested, caring, and loving woman I knew. I was in high school when she died. How I wished that I had told her how much I loved her. But I never did.

Mom has the same wonderful qualities that Grandma Helzberg had. At age fifty-eight, Mom was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her doctors warned us that the illness would affect the rest of her life. The news devastated the family. It made me think how random life is. And how fragile, how impermanent.

Before her illness, Mom had been tremendously active and physically strong. Now, almost twenty years later, she needs help to walk and requires continuous care. The doctors say her condition is related to her cancer.

I hadn't visited her enough. Now I see her often. And when I do, she always says, "I love you so much." Always. She sometimes tells me these five words two or three times during a single visit. At least I can now respond, "I love you, too."

And I finally told my mother that I love her before she said the same words to me.

I would have to say that Mary is a better mother than I am a father. Throughout our marriage, she has consistently, unfailingly focused on the family. At least I have learned from and tried to emulate her. My sons know that I love them, and I've attempted to be a good example for them. Now that they're young adults, I take pride in the way they have grown up and lead their lives. And I'll always hold on to my wonderful memories of their childhood and all that they've taught me about life.

When I look back on my life—as a parent, husband, or son—I occasionally wish that I had done some things differently. But I've decided

that there's no value in stewing over past mistakes or missed opportunities. After all, we're all human. The better thing is to look ahead, and to make changes in order to become a better person. I haven't yet achieved a satisfactory balance in my life. But I think I'm getting closer.

During what I consider my second semester in life, I'm trying harder to overcome what has always been my insatiable need to be productive. I'm aiming for less "doing" and more "being." I'm trying to slow down. I've begun practicing yoga, although I'm not very good at it. Mary and I take a walk together on most days. I want to take piano lessons. And having recently biked across my home state with Jason on a portion of the Lewis and Clark Trail, I'd like to take more family bicycle trips. I plan to read more books, something I've done so little of as an adult.

I used to believe that my job at H&R Block was so all-consuming that, when added to my family commitments, I simply did not have time to become meaningfully engaged in the community. I was wrong. I discovered that I did have time to work at a food bank when the boys were young, as Mary had suggested we do as a family activity. Virtually everyone can find some time to give. And there's always a shortage of doers.

As the Dalai Lama said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." I'm working at it.

What legacy do I hope to leave?

I'm no Booker T. Washington or Henry W. Bloch; I don't pretend for a second that I'll be remembered as a great educator or businessman after my death. But I do expect that my sons, and perhaps some of my students, will remember me.

I hope I will be remembered first as a father and second as a teacher.

Of all the professions in our society, none can create a more powerful legacy than teaching. As educator J. Lloyd Trump said, "Events in our classrooms today will prompt world events tomorrow."[5]

But there is a frustrating quality to teaching: teachers never know how much they truly change the world because their influence is largely immeasurable. Henry B. Adams, a historian, journalist, and grandson of John Quincy Adams, said that "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

I hope to have influenced my students in positive ways. It's certainly gratifying to hear from students like Tina, who was in my first class in 1995 and indicates that I helped her along the way. Like me, she's now an algebra teacher in an urban middle school. And I'm confident she'll have a lasting effect on her own students. It's not important that the world thinks of me as a great teacher, but maybe a few of my students will. Andy Rooney, the television commentator, observed, "Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives."[6]

Even more than my students, my two sons are my legacy and my future. For better or for worse, a part of every parent lives on in their kids' lives.

I sometimes wonder how Jason and Teddy will remember me. I doubt that they will remember me as a success in business or education, to the extent that I was either of these things. But that's fine with me. Albert Einstein said, "Try not to become a man of success but rather to become a man of value."

Here's what I expect my sons will say about me after I'm gone. He was a worrier. He told stupid jokes. He hardly ever stopped to smell the roses. He never let a weed grow in his garden. He loved his family. He also loved barbecue, pasta, cheese, olives, and garlic. He didn't like to spend money on himself. He was technologically challenged. He talked too loud on the phone. He was always turning off the lights in the house. He wanted to spend more time at his farm, where he enjoyed nature, his menial projects, and peacefulness. He didn't like to travel. He was hard on himself.

He cared about his students, and he liked to tell stories about them. He tried to make a contribution to the world. He chose to be a teacher—and in that choice he finally became the person he wanted to be.

Tempus fugit.

EPILOGUE

"THE ETHICAL DECISION IS always the fearsome decision. When something matters enough that we are afraid of the consequences—afraid that even the honorable choice could result in harm or loss or sorrow—that's when ethics are involved." My dad spoke these words in a speech in 2004.

The hardest decision of my life was to leave H&R Block. That was thirteen years ago. Thirteen years is a long time in the life of a family—or a school. And time enough, certainly, for me to reach some conclusions on how it all turned out.

I remember the time I came home from school after changing careers to sit down in front of an interviewer and a CBS News camera in my living room. The reporter from New York asked all the predictable questions. "Why did you step down as CEO?" "Why did you become a teacher?" But then came one that no reporter had yet asked.

"So what if your boys grow up and say, 'We really want to get into the family business,' and they want to be CEO one day?"

It was the easiest of her questions to answer. My response was essentially the same as that of my own parents decades ago.

"I want them to do whatever *they* want to do," I replied, "and be happy doing what they do." At the time, my sons were quite young, with Jason in the sixth grade and Teddy in the fourth. Their careers seemed a long time away.

Now that time has come.

Last year, Jason, who was a senior at Middlebury College in Vermont, told Mary and me that he wanted to pursue a career at H&R Block. That decision was made without any influence whatsoever from either of us.

Jason has since moved to Boston, where he began his job with the company. I guess you could say that he's (pardon the pun) a chip off the old block, just as I was. He has already learned how to prepare

tax returns and is now being trained to become a district manager. He's starting on the ground floor, as I did. And he's working hard.

Our second son, Teddy, will be a senior at Princeton University. I would be surprised if he were to choose to follow the footsteps of his grandfather, father, and brother into the family business. That's because Teddy is much more interested in professional sports than professional tax preparation. And he's a talented writer. I enjoy reading his articles on track, crew, and basketball in the *Daily Princetonian.* Although he isn't quite sure what career path he will follow, Teddy sees his calling in a profession that's connected in some way with the business of sports.

Both boys are in a position to do what they love and not to worry about how much they make. But I hope they understand that, as English author and clergyman Charles Kingsley said, "We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us happy is something to be enthusiastic about."

Speaking of enthusiasm, Mary, who hasn't practiced law since Jason was born, has recently begun following her passion as a food writer. She has a monthly food column in a local magazine. She's also a food critic on Kansas City's NPR station. And she was excited to be commissioned to write articles for in-flight magazines. This new pursuit means that Mary and I go out for dinner regularly. I wouldn't complain about having to go out to eat so often if she weren't such an outstanding cook at home.

I took a year off from teaching to write this book, but I continued to serve as president of the board of University Academy, a position I've held for seven years. In summer 2007, the board elected Bush Helzberg to succeed his father, Barnett, as chairman. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Bush earned his master's in business at Columbia University and a law degree at Stanford. He spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali, West Africa, where he helped open a bank in a town of ten thousand that previously had no financial infrastructure. After a stint on Wall Street, he's now back in Kansas City working as a

portfolio manager at the investment management firm he founded. And it's particularly gratifying to me—and, of course, to Barnett and Shirley—that Bush has a strong desire to make University Academy a great school.

From my vantage point, University Academy is making good progress in its quest to become a great urban school. I feel that we are closer to realizing that dream today than we have ever been.

Cheri Shannon, our superintendent, has led the school for a second year. Caucasian, blonde, and petite, Cheri may not fit the stereotypical profile of an inner-city school administrator. But she's quick to point out that what's really important are knowledge, leadership ability, and a passion for urban education. She has certainly demonstrated all of these qualities.

Cheri's first challenge has been to address University Academy's high attrition rate. In years past, she notes, "we would start with maybe ninety students [as freshmen] and eventually graduate maybe thirteen." Expanding the Academy to include a lower school has proven to be the key to an improvement in retention. At the start of the 2007–08 academic year, 80 percent of the students from the previous year returned to the school. Although there's still plenty of room for improvement, this is a change for the better.

Cheri is focused too on making the city's largest charter school, our own University Academy, great. "We're not there yet," she admits. But she adds that within five years, "there's no excuse for us not to be one of the top charter schools in the country."

"The culture will be set at the lower school level," Cheri explains. Once set, it should persist as a given class moves into the always difficult middle and high school years. "We should [keep students]," she continues. "That's our job. If we can't, we shouldn't be here."

Cheri also has moved to strengthen the academic program and the administrative team. For example, an improved remedial reading program has been implemented in the lower levels. And instead of one lower school principal, there are now three—one for grades K–2, a second for grades 3–4, and a third for 5–6. Construction was

completed last summer to reconfigure some areas within the school to accommodate an increased enrollment of eleven hundred students, up from a thousand. Interest among urban parents in enrolling their children at University Academy continues to be very strong. The length of our waiting list approximates our total enrollment.

Cheri refuses to accept one widely used excuse for poor performance in inner-city schools: the fact that many students come from broken families.

"I tell teachers, 'You have eight hours a day with these students. That's more than their parents have.'" The bottom-line mission of University Academy is to "break the cycle of poverty and dysfunction by giving students a quality education," she says. "That's the only way that students will be successful in life."

Jerry Cooper, assistant dean of education at UMKC and the individual responsible for overseeing its charter schools, recently wrote to the board of University Academy. "The one factor that is consistent with academic achievement in a school setting is leadership," he said. Cheri Shannon "was able to model the core values, beliefs, and high expectations for the school in every possible way. She was steadfast in her beliefs about 'all children can learn' and she was able to prove this during this past Missouri Assessment Program."

Jerry concluded, "UMKC is proud to sponsor the University Academy and under Cheri Shannon the school has surpassed our expectations for this year and we look forward to another great school year."

Cheri's longer-term vision would be to add one or possibly two sister campuses to the existing University Academy. At least one of them would include a pre-kindergarten program that would feed into the school. But that won't happen immediately. In a recent meeting in which she reviewed her ambitious expansion plans, she recalled what Barnett, the retired jewelry chain executive, said: "We've got to get this store right first."

The charter school movement in Kansas City is gathering strength. In fact, University Academy now faces intensifying competition.

At least two of the more established charters in town are planning to expand their enrollments by increasing the number of grade levels offered. In other words, they intend to do exactly what University Academy has already done: offer all elementary and secondary grades. And, ironically, a charter school has relocated to the building that formerly housed SFX, where I had spent my first five years as a classroom teacher.

In addition, two new charter schools opened last year. One is a Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school. KIPP was founded by two men who had originally participated in Teach for America, a nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to recruiting recent college graduates to teach in inner-city schools. There are now over fifty KIPP schools in sixteen states and Washington DC. Most are middle schools. Their demographics are not dissimilar to University Academy's. More than 90 percent of their students are African American or Hispanic, and over 80 percent qualify for the federal government's subsidized lunch program.[1]

A new charter school has also opened in University Academy's original location. It is operated by not-for-profit Harmony Schools of Texas. Harmony offers a college prep program with emphasis on math, science, and computer applications. Its schools have obtained funding from Michael and Susan Dell of the Dell Computer family as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. And one of its schools received the Title I National Distinguished School Award from the U.S. Department of Education.[2] Harmony could become a formidable competitor.

Against this backdrop, our board and staff recently got a friendly challenge when a team of evaluators from our sponsor, UMKC, conducted a two-day assessment of our school. The leader of the evaluation team assured us over breakfast that University Academy is considered the charter school flagship in the city. But, he added, "You're going to have to step it up."

I thought to myself that this is exactly as it should be. Schools ought to be pushed to improve. The real winners in this kind of competitive marketplace will be the students.

With my book sabbatical ended, I'm back in the classroom, and I plan to become more involved in supporting inner-city teacher preparation programs like the Institute for Urban Education at UMKC. I look forward to spending more time with Mary.

She and I have made some adjustments to our lifestyle. As empty nesters, we decided to sell our house in town and move into a condominium about a mile away. We made this decision because we wanted to spend more time at our farm located outside Kansas City, where we have a cabin surrounded by woods and fields of wheat, corn, and soybeans. I especially enjoy working in my vegetable garden, and Mary enjoys cooking with our homegrown organic produce. I have cleared a trail through the woods, which overlook a lake. It's a peaceful and undisturbed natural area that we treasure.

Someone said, "Now and then it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy." For me, our farm is the perfect place to slow down and do just that.

Mary and I will soon celebrate our twenty-sixth anniversary. Even though my life has gone in a very different direction than I had envisioned when we were married, I wouldn't trade any of those years for anything. I entered our marriage as an executive at H&R Block with the expectation of a lifetime at the company. If someone had told me then that I would voluntarily leave the company after nineteen years, I would have thought they were nuts. Or if someone had told me then that I would eventually write a memoir that focused on my experiences as an urban teacher, I would have thought they had confused me with someone else.

I would also have given no credence to the suggestion when I left H&R Block that the then president of the United States might some day hear about, let alone recognize, my efforts in urban education. To my complete amazement, just as this book was scheduled to enter final production, a letter addressed to me from President Clinton arrived at the middle school office. I couldn't help but show it to my students. They were much more interested in touching the stationery than in the letter's contents. I, in contrast, was touched that the former president

took the time to compliment me and also praise the work of University Academy's faculty and staff.

At age fifty-four, I approach the future with much less of a road map than I had in the past. With or without a map, I now realize more clearly that no one knows what the future will bring. As songwriter John Lennon said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

Amid life's uncertainty, I look to the future with a great deal of hope. I hope that my sons lead productive and full lives. I hope that University Academy flourishes for generations. I hope for an equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of family income. And I hope that I can be helpful in making these dreams come true.

I have managed to incorporate my favorite quotations into this book. But there's one that I haven't included so far. It addresses what I had once thought was the toughest of questions to answer: What is the meaning of life? Then I read the Dalai Lama's response, which impressed me as so utterly on point. He simply said, "To be happy and useful."

Happiness and usefulness. I can think of no more fitting goals in this short life. And I now know that achieving them is possible.

APPENDIX

MY FATHER, HENRY BLOCH, delivered the keynote address at the forty-third annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast in 2004. He spoke about ethics. Until that address, which he delivered at age eighty-one, Dad had spoken little about ethics during his personal or professional life. But he walked the ethics walk like no one else I've ever known.

Two quotations from that speech are included in this book, one at the end of the first chapter and the other at the beginning of the Epilogue. Thanks to the inspiration of my editor, Kate Bradford, that first quotation was the source of this book's title.

I'm delighted to share these excerpts of my dad's remarks with you. And I'm grateful to him for showing me how to stand for the best.

Excerpts from Remarks by Henry W. Bloch
Mayor's Prayer Breakfast
February 13, 2004
Kansas City

. . . I've heard a story a number of times at management seminars and other business gatherings. I always liked it, and although some of you might have heard it, it's short, so I'll tell it again.

A great ship was moving through the dark sea one night, back before radar, when signals were used to communicate and to navigate. The ship's commander was on the bridge when a seaman approached. "Sir, there is something ahead."

"Send a message," said the captain. "Tell them 'Adjust your course 30 degrees south.'"

A few minutes later, the seaman was back with the reply: "Adjust YOUR course 30 degrees north." The commander was aggravated.

He ordered the seaman, "Send this message: 'Repeat. Adjust your course 30 degrees south to avoid collision.'"

Shortly the seaman returned with the reply: "Recommend you adjust *your* course 30 degrees *north* to avoid collision."

The commander was tired from a long voyage and in no mood to take orders. "Send them this," he said.

"'I am the commander of this fleet and the captain of a naval battleship. We will NOT adjust OUR course.'"

Shortly the answer came back. "That's too bad, sir. I am just a signalman—but I am in a lighthouse."

This story reminds us that some things are immovable. They are standards, values, and ways of being that we all recognize as important. Maybe we can call the sum of those—and the ways that people put them into action—ethics.

People can and sometimes do talk frequently about ethics. Here's a simple way I like to think about the word. It means a combination of the best decisions we can make and the ways we act on them.

In the story about the ship, ethical standards are the lighthouse. We can see it for what it is and use it as a guide. Or we can ignore the signals and risk crashing onto the rocks.

Ethics mean more than knowing the right thing to do. Knowing the right thing to do but not doing it is not ethical.

Ethics are a combination of deciding on the right thing to do and then doing it as best you can.

Ethics is a subject I have never talked about in public that I can remember. The way I was raised, being on your best behavior was an expectation, not a subject for discussion. If it *was* under discussion, you had missed the mark.

That's true for most of you, I imagine. In business and civic life, we don't talk much about ethics in public unless somehow someone has missed the mark.

Only when someone has behaved badly in ways that affect other people—then the subject of ethics comes up.

That's why it's not *good news* that ethics has been in the media so much in recent times. For the most part, it's not news at all when people try hard to make thoughtful, responsible decisions. However, it gets to be news when there's bad behavior.

So when ethics makes the news, it's because someone—usually in a leadership position—has failed to behave responsibly or ethically.

The failures of leaders—THAT seems to be news worth reporting. The result is that a lot of people now wonder whether their leaders are honest and ethical.

. . . Who can blame them? Scandals involving corporate and nonprofit leaders, elected and appointed officials, even religious leaders have recently lit up the headlines. It's not surprising that many citizens think ethics are an endangered species. I don't think that—and I feel pretty sure you don't either. I am certain that you believe as I do that the real story is the one that doesn't make the news.

It is the story of ordinary daily decisions at all levels. Decisions that reflect values that we share. Decisions that take responsibility for the well-being of families, companies, communities. Decisions that are true to the decision maker's best self.

This may not make news. But it IS ethics. It is REAL leadership. It is fundamental to everything we hope to achieve together. And it is scary.

The ethical decision is always the fearsome decision. When something matters enough that we are afraid of the consequences—afraid that even the honorable choice could result in harm or loss or sorrow—that's when ethics are involved. For leaders, that means most of the choices you face every day.

I was thinking back over decisions we made in the company—if there were any that stood out as really tough ethical choices. I was proud to realize that I had a hard time remembering any.

From the start we never had the opportunity to be unethical. Dick and I grew up knowing that if someone in a restaurant handed us the wrong change, we gave it back—or that when we made a promise, our word was our bond.

That was a family value, and from the beginning ours was a family company.

It translated into a culture that is still there, even in a company that is now very sophisticated and performance oriented. It is still a culture of caring about the community, our associates, our customers, and above all else doing the right thing.

When the company was really starting to grow in the early 1970s, we were located in a five-thousand-square-foot building at 44th and Main Street. We badly needed to expand.

We had offers to move to other locations, but we decided that to move away from the center of the city at that time would be wrong. Staying in midtown then was the right thing to do. Moving would have been simpler and less expensive for the company; but it would have hurt the well-being of the central city.

So we decided to expand by buying the building next door. It was a clock repair shop, and it had been there a very long time. I went to the owner and said, "Bernie, we want to buy you out," and offered a price that fit the market. He wasn't interested.

The company could have had the property condemned. But we didn't. Our board said, "Pay him what he wants. That's the right thing to do."

. . . Let me mention another example of a tough decision that involved my family and the company. You'll forgive me if I tell it with a father's pride.

My son Tom left the company some time back. When he came into my office and said, "Dad, I'm thinking of leaving," I was shocked. He was our CEO, and he was doing an excellent job. But he wanted to leave so he could teach in the inner city.

I didn't get it, at first. But I didn't have to—it wasn't my decision to make. He said, "Dad, being president of H&R Block is not fulfilling—it's not what I want to do."

I believe Tom made an ethical decision. He chose to be the best person he could imagine being. That Tom Bloch—the one he wanted to be—is a math teacher who helps prepare children for life and college. The charter school where he teaches has a waiting list of a thousand students. He believes in his work and is happy, and—more important—he feels that he is making a difference. I am proud of him and his choice.

. . . Martin Luther King left us a call to action on this subject. He said:

> Cowardice asks the question: Is it safe?
>
> Expediency asks the question: Is it politic?
>
> Vanity asks the question: Is it popular?
>
> But conscience asks the question: Is it right?
>
> And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one's conscience tells one that it is right.

If I were to offer a prayer here today it would be simple:

Let us stand in the places we are most afraid we will fall. Let us stand for the best, no matter the cost. Let us stand so that we can strengthen each other.

You who are gathered here today—you who lead this community—you are the good news about ethics. Your daily choices support the rest of us.

Thank you for being ready to stand for what's right.

And thank you for this time together.

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America's Promise Alliance
The nation's largest multisector collaborative dedicated to the well-being of children and youth
www.americaspromise.org

American Association of School Administrators
A professional organization for more than thirteen thousand educational leaders across the United States
www.aasa.org

American Federation of Teachers
Represents the economic, social, and professional interests of classroom teachers
www.aft.org

American Youth Policy Forum
Provides learning opportunities for policy leaders, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels
www.aypf.org

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Advocates sound policies and shares best practices to achieve the success of each learner
www.ascd.org

Building Excellent Schools
Serves as a national model for supporting excellence in public education through the national charter school movement
www.buildingexcellentschools.org

The Center for Academic Integrity
Provides a forum to identify, affirm, and promote the values of academic integrity among students, faculty, teachers, and administrators
www.academicintegrity.org

The Center for Education Reform
Creates opportunities for and challenges obstacles to better education for America's communities
www.edreform.com

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence
A research and development program focused on improving the education of students whose ability to reach their potential is challenged by language or cultural barriers, race, geographic location, or poverty
http://crede.berkeley.edu/index.html

Center X
Transforms UCLA's pre-service teacher education program, its professional development programs for practicing professional educators, and its EdD program in educational leadership into a new configuration of collaborative activities
www.centerx.gseis.ucla.edu

Character Counts
The Josephson Institute's widely implemented approach to character education
www.charactercounts.org

Character Education Partnership
Dedicated to developing young people of good character who become responsible and caring citizens
www.character.org

CHARACTER*plus*
A project of cooperating school districts in Missouri and Illinois that works to advance the cause of character education and sustain its impact on the lives of educators and students
www.characterplus.com

Charter School Policy Institute
Advances quality public school choice by providing information, analysis, and opinion to policymakers, thought leaders, and key stakeholders
www.charterschoolpolicy.org

Corporation for National and Community Service
Engages Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service to meet community needs
www.nationalservice.gov

Council of the Great City Schools
Promotes the cause of urban schools and advocates for inner-city students through legislation, research, and media relations
www.cgcs.org

Dream Job Coaching
Helps individuals define and land work that matches their natural gifts and passions
www.dreamjobcoaching.com

Educators for Social Responsibility
Helps educators create safe, caring, respectful, and productive learning environments
www.esrnational.org

Ethics Resource Center
Sponsors character development programs for educational institutions
www.ethics.org

First Amendment Schools
A national reform initiative designed to transform how schools teach and practice the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that frame civic life in our democracy
www.firstamendmentschools.org

GreatSchools
Helps parents choose the best school by providing comprehensive profiles for more than 120,000 schools nationwide
www.greatschools.net

H&R Block
A leading provider of tax, financial, and accounting and business consulting services and products
www.hrblock.com

Indiana University Northwest Urban Teacher Education Program
Committed to the development of "star" urban teachers as supported by the research on effective teaching in urban schools
www.iun.edu/~utep

Inequality.org
A portal of information about the growing concentration of income and wealth
www.demos.org/inequality/index.cfm

Institute for Educational Leadership
Provides services in developing and supporting leaders for education, strengthening school-family-community connections, and connecting and improving policies and systems that serve children and youth
www.iel.org

Institute for Global Ethics
Dedicated to promoting ethical action in a global context
www.globalethics.org

Institute for Policy Studies
A multi-issue think tank that pursues democracy and fairness, global justice, and peace and security
www.ips-dc.org

Institute for Urban Education
A four-year undergraduate program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City that is specifically targeted to develop teachers for urban schools
http://iue.umkc.edu

Josephson Institute of Ethics
Offers a variety of consulting services and training courses in business ethics, public administration, policing, character education, and sportsmanship
www.josephsoninstitute.org

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
Provides assistance to state charter school associations and resource centers, develops and advocates for improved public policies, and serves as the united voice for the charter school movement
www.publiccharters.org

National Alliance of Black School Educators
Devoted to furthering the academic success for the nation's children, particularly children of African descent
www.nabse.org

National Association of Charter School Authorizers
Works with local experts to create the conditions needed for quality charter schools to thrive
www.qualitycharters.org

National Association of Elementary School Principals
Provides professional support and critical information to elementary and middle-level principals
www.naesp.org

National Association of Secondary School Principals
Promotes excellence in middle and high school leadership
www.nassp.org

National Center for Alternative Certification
A clearinghouse for information about alternative routes to certification in the United States
www.teach-now.org

National Center for Education Information
A national source of information about education and teacher preparation
www.ncei.com

National Center for Educational Accountability
Supports efforts to raise academic expectations and to promote the practices that will help more students reach college and career readiness
www.just4kids.org

National Charter Schools Institute
Helps charter schools improve student achievement and comply with applicable laws across the nation by identifying and implementing effective strategies
www.nationalcharterschools.org

National Education Association
The nation's largest professional employee organization
www.nea.org

National School Boards Association
Fosters excellence and equity in public education through school board leadership
www.nsba.org

Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education
An interactive forum at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education investigating critical issues in urban education
www.urbanedjournal.org

The President's Volunteer Service Award
Recognizes the valuable contributions volunteers are making in the United States
www.presidentialserviceawards.gov

Project Wisdom
A collection of daily words of wisdom licensed to over fourteen thousand schools nationwide
www.projectwisdom.com

Public Education Network
A national association of local education funds and individuals working to advance public school reform in low-income communities
www.publiceducation.org

Rockhurst University
A Jesuit university in Kansas City, Missouri
www.rockhurst.edu

The State University of New York Urban Teacher Education Center
Serves the needs of the seventeen individual SUNY campuses with teacher preparation programs
www.suny.edu/sutec

Teach for America
A national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools
www.teachforamerica.org

Teacher Policy Research
A research partnership that examines teachers, issues in teaching, and teacher education to provide education policymakers with current, useful data to inform their policy decisions
www.teacherpolicyresearch.org

Teachers for a New Era
An initiative designed to strengthen K–12 teaching by developing state-of-the-art programs at schools of education
www.teachersforanewera.org

Tolerance.org
Provides educators with free educational materials that promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity in the classroom and beyond
www.tolerance.org

U.S. Department of Education
Promotes student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access
www.ed.gov

US Charter Schools
The most widely used and comprehensive online resource available to charter schools
www.uscharterschools.org

University Academy
A K–12 college preparatory charter public school located in Kansas City, Missouri
www.universityacademy.org

University of Missouri-Kansas City
A public urban research university in Kansas City, Missouri
www.umkc.edu

Urban Educator Corps
The educational initiative of the Urban Serving Universities, a consortium of seventeen public urban universities that together prepare over 20 percent of the nation's future urban educators
www.ed.uab.edu/uec/index.htm

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